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Language, Literacy, and Pedagogy in Postindustrial Societies

The Case of Black Academic
Underachievement

Paul C. Mocombe and Carol Tomlin



Language, Literacy, and Pedagogy in Postindustrial Societies

In postindustrial economies such as the United States and Great Britain, the black/white achievement gap is perpetuated by an emphasis on language and language skills, with which black American and black British-Caribbean youths often struggle. This work analyzes the nature of educational pedagogy in the contemporary capitalist world-system under American hegemony. Mocombe and Tomlin interpret the role of education as an institutional or ideological apparatus for capitalist domination, and examine the sociolinguistic means or pedagogies by which global and local social actors are educated within the capitalist world-system to serve the needs of capital; i.e., capital accumulation. Two specific case studies, one in the United States and one in the United Kingdom, are utilized to demonstrate how contemporary educational emphasis on language and literacy parallels the postindustrial organization of work in the two societies and contributes to the debate on academic underachievement of black students vis-a-vis their white and Asian counterparts.

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**The Case of Black Academic
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—Paul Camy Mocombe, May 3, 2012

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Introduction

The black-white test score gap, which highlights the fact that blacks have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs compared with their white counterparts, is an empirical problematic that dates back to the 1940s. On many standardized tests the mean scores of black students on average are typically at least 1 standard deviation below the mean scores of white students. As Roland G. Fryer Jr. and Steven D. Levitt (2004) point out, “a wide variety of possible explanations for the test-score gap have been put forth. These explanations include differences in genetic make-up, differences in family structure and poverty, differences in school quality, racial bias in testing or teachers’ perceptions, and differences in culture, socialization, or behavior. The appropriate public policy choice (if any) to address the test score gap depends critically on the underlying source of the gap” (447). Contemporarily, the public policy choices of standardization of curriculum, mentoring, and after-school programs of school boards throughout the nation have been implemented in light of the predominance of John Ogbu’s cultural, socialization, or behavior explanation, “burden of acting white” and Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory as adopted by James Coleman (Fryer and Levitt, 2004; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2010).

The logic behind these two positions is based, on the one hand, on the assumption that African American students view academic success as the purposive-rationality of white Americans and therefore do not apply themselves to academically succeed for fear of being labeled acting white by their peers (Ogbu, 1974, 1994). On the other hand, the other position is based on the assumption that black American students enter school lacking the social, linguistic, and cultural capital or values of middle class America, which is required for them to succeed academically (Coleman, 1966). In both instances, educational practitioners seek to resolve this burden of acting white and lack of middle class values by attempting to give African American’s the cultural and social capital, which are viewed as race neutral and are assumed by schools, required to become successful in school. That is, give them through social, community, and parental involvement, social capital, the linguistic and cultural competencies, cultural capital, of middle-class parents that schools require (Coleman, 1966; Bourdieu, 1973). This

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solution is problematic in that the practical activities, mentoring programs, cultural activities, teaching Standard English, and after-school programs, implemented in schools in order to give black Americans the middle-class cultural and social capitals required to become academically successful and close the achievement gap becomes paradoxically self-defeating in attempting to resolve the black-white achievement gap in contemporary postindustrial societies. That is, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of social reproduction refers to several forms of "capital" (cultural, economic, symbolic, and social). The "capital" references refer to the institutional norms, resources, connections, etc. that one needs in capitalist societies to participate in its cultural, economic, political, symbolic, and social life. Bourdieu posits that the possession of, for the most part, middle class "capital" is assumed by the educational system in contemporary society, but is not taught. Thus, education theorists such as James Coleman (1966), who have operationalized Bourdieu's concept, conclude, poor African American students enter school at a disadvantage (they lack "middle class social and cultural capital), which leads to their "poor" academic achievement. The solution from this perspective is to teach and orient these poor students to more middle class values and norms so that they can achieve like their white counterparts. In the postindustrial service economies of the US and UK where the lack of social, political, and cultural capital is commodified and celebrated by corporate capital for capital accumulation, however, Bourdieu's theory is problematic in that to speak of the lack of capital, social, cultural, political, etc. as a barrier to upward economic mobility and status in capitalist society is no longer the case and politically incorrect because the postmodern identities and fields structurally created among blacks by the lack of cultural, economic, social, and political capital have been contemporarily commodified by corporate capital and come to serve as means to acquiring status, economic gain, and upward economic mobility for blacks in postindustrial capitalist societies. Hence this need to develop a cultural realm to explain agency within capitalist relations of production as Bourdieu has done with his theory of praxis negates the agential moments of the actors through the commodification of their structural position, which brings Bourdieu's theory and the actions of those who lack capital back to the structural realm of analysis, and fails to explain the persistence of black academic underachievement. In this work, we seek to fully develop a dialectical and structural understanding of why blacks have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs compared with their white counterparts by suggesting that this black/white achievement gap in postindustrial societies like America and the United Kingdom is an epiphenomenon of the dialectic of the global capitalist social structure of class inequality as reinforced by education as an ideological state apparatus of such a system. As a result, the black/white achievement gap will always be among us so long as the global capitalist system, under the leadership of the upper-class of owners and high-level executives, is in place.

The upper class of owners and high-level executives, based in the corporate community of developed countries like the US, represent today's dominant bourgeois capitalist class whose various distributive powers lead to a situation where their ideologies and policies (discourse and discursive practices, i.e., neoliberal policies) determine the "life chances" of not only local social actors, within the globalizing developed nation, but global ones as well. As William Domhoff (2002) points out in *Who Rules America*, "The routinized ways of acting in the United States follow from the rules and regulations needed by the corporate community to continue to grow and make profits" (Domhoff, 2002: 181).

Globally, this action plays out through US dominated post-World War II international institutions such as the World Bank (WB), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) etc., who prescribe fiscal, political, and social policies to countries in search of aid for development. These policies aid the corporate-driven agenda of the developed world (fits them within the structure of their social relations, i.e., the discourse of the Protestant ethic and its discursive practice, the spirit of capitalism), rather than the agenda of the developing countries: the establishment of "free" open markets as the basis for development and social relations in developing countries, whose markets when established are unable to compete with that of competitors in the West. They therefore get usurped by the capitalists of the West who take advantage of the labor force—which is cheapened in order to compete globally with other, cheaper, prospective markets—and other resources of the developing country, who must allow these investors into their country in order to pay back the debts they owe to the aforementioned international institutions lest they are declared ineligible for aid and development loans if they do not open up (liberalize) and secure their markets.

On one side of the political spectrum, this contemporary trend has been labeled globalization (market-driven as opposed to the post-World War II development model, which emphasized economic replication, i.e., prescribed stages of economic development for developing countries, along the lines of the developed world—US and Europe) under the auspices of neoliberalism (McMichael, 1996; Portes, 1997), a common sense view that tends to see globalization as both an ideological force (a conceptualization of the world (i.e., establishment of markets as the basis for social relations)) and a material force (i.e., real transnational movements of capital and commodities). That is to say, from this "natural attitude" or perspective, globalization serves not only as a tool, via outsourcing, for investors to extract concessions from states, and for investors and states to extract concessions from workers and other citizens (Klak, 1998: 5), but also as a means of socialization and enculturation to the global capitalist social relations of production as the constitutive "practical consciousness" of modern societies. This is an ideological position, which assumes a distinction between the "life-world" of cultural meanings and subjective experiences,

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and the capitalist non-cultural, but democratically rational, economic system, which “organically” governs them as a result of politically arrived at agreements (Habermas, 1984).

On the other side of the political spectrum, this same position amounts to a (neo)liberal euphemism for Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) Marxist world-systems theory, which emphasizes the integration of the countries of the world into a functional system “based on capitalist commodity production organized by a world market in which both purely economic competitive advantage and political interference by states play an interactive role” (Chase-Dunn and Robinson, 1977: 455). In other words, “in the modern world-system there is only one mode of production, commodity production for profit on the world market, that articulates different forms of labor exploitation and encompasses a system of differentially powerful [core] states and peripheral areas” (Chase-Dunn and Robinson, 1977: 455) from whom concessions are extracted and social relations are normalized, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, to meet the ends (profit-motive) of the capitalist system as driven by one powerful core state, the hegemon. In today’s global setting the US being that hegemon.

According to this world-systems perspective, different countries, which are divided into periphery, semi-periphery, and core nations, all, based on their comparative economic advantage, produce certain commodities, determined by US capital, for profit on the world market: periphery nations produce agricultural products; semi-periphery nations produce manufacturing products from industries outsourced from core nations that produce and invest in cultural products for consumers in their postindustrial economies. This post-1970s global capitalist social relation of production is governed by neoliberal economic rules and regulations, which the countries must agree to if they are to participate in the social structure or relations of the global marketplace under US hegemony.

These two sociopolitical understandings regarding the origins and nature of globalization, as Kevin Archer et al. points out, have “set off a vigorous and at times rancorous debate within the social sciences (2007: 2). On one side of the debate you have theorists who argue along the lines of the world-system view, and emphasize the “culture-of-globalization,” the idea that “the constitutive role of culture is critical for grasping the continued hegemony of capitalism in the form of globalization. . . . Culture, they assert is increasingly being co-opted and deployed as a new accumulation strategy [in postindustrial economies] to broaden and deepen the frontiers of capitalism and to displace its inherent crisis tendencies (Archer and Francis, 2007: 2–3). In a word, the cultures of the world are commodified by the upper class of owners and high-level executives, operating in postindustrial world or core cities, to make a profit or produce surplus-value given the declining significance of profit from their investment in industrial production, which have been outsourced to China, Brazil, Mexico, India, and South Africa who have come to constitute the semi-periphery (industrial)

nations of the capitalist world-system. Africa, the Caribbean, and some parts of Southeast Asia remain periphery (pre-industrial) agricultural and tourist states.

On the other side of the debate are those theorists who highlight “globalization-as-culture.” They believe “that globalization is marked by the hollowing out of national cultural spaces either consequent upon the retrenchment of the nation state or because culture continues to be a relatively autonomous sphere” (Archer and Francis, 2007: 2). That is, “[f]or the “globalization-as-culture” group . . . culture is not that easily enjoined due to its inherent counter-hegemonic properties vis-à-vis neo-liberal globalization. Rather, for this group . . . contemporary globalization is not merely economic, but a system of multiple cultural articulations which are shaped by disjunctive space-time coordinates. In other words, globalization is as much if not more the product of inexorable and accelerated migratory cultural flows and electronic mass mediations beyond the space-time envelopes of the nation-state system and the successive socio-spatial fixes of global capitalism” (Archer and Francis, 2007: 4). In fact, culture, in many instances, serves as a counter-hegemonic movement to (neo)liberal capitalism as a governing “rational” system.

Theoretically, this debate between the advocates of the “culture-of-globalization” and the “globalization-as-culture” hypotheses is a fruitless debate grounded in a false ontological and epistemological understanding of the origins and nature of the (neo)liberal capitalist system that gives rise to the processes of the global relations of production, globalization, under American hegemony beginning in the 1970s. Both groups ontologically and epistemologically assume that the origins of capitalism and its discursive practice are grounded in the Enlightenment’s historical development of reason and rationality, culture, and industry; thus, drawing on the liberal distinction between capitalism as a public and neutral system of rationality or rational rules of laws that stand apart from the understanding of it more in line with the German philosopher Herder’s (1784) perspective, as a private sphere or life-world cultural form grounded in the ontology of agents of the Protestant ethic. For the culture-of-globalization school the economic rationality of neoliberal policies homogenize (through international ideological apparatuses such as the World Bank, World Court, IMF, etc.) the public spheres’ of nation-states so that their citizenry can partake as laborers and consumers in the global marketplace via work and consumption of goods provided by multinational and transnational businesses. From the globalization-as-culture camp, social action and the public spheres of other nation-states are not homogenized via globalizing economic neoliberal policies; instead, cultural groups synthesize or hybridize these rational neoliberal policies with their cultural ethos to prevent their societies from completely resembling the West.

In essence both schools of thought are putting forth the same convergence argument, the “culture-of-globalization” position from a Marxian

systems integration perspective and the “globalization-as-culture” position from a Weberian social integration perspective. For the “culture-of-globalization” position cultural practices are homogenized economically so as to be integrated within the systemicity of capitalist relations of production and consumption at the world-system level in order to generate surplus-value from postindustrial (cultural products and entertainment), industrial, and or agricultural production. That is via the retrenchment of the nation-state system, each country, nation-state, or culture, has an economic role to play in the global capitalist world-system. That role, agricultural or industrial, is determined by the upper class of owners and high-level executives located predominantly in the US and other core or developed postindustrial nations (Western Europe, Japan, and Australia) who in-turn service the financial and (cultural) entertainment needs of the middle classes of the world or nation-states, which they create, as an hybrid administrative bourgeoisie, through the outsourcing of work. The tastes and desires of this hybrid middle class, given their embourgeoisement via ideological apparatuses such as education, media, the World Bank, UN, IMF, etc., are a direct parallel to the tastes and desires of the upper class of owners and high-level executives in the postindustrial nations. Hence via economic globalizing forces cultures are homogenized via hybridization and the “retrenchment of the nation state” to participate in the global capitalist world-system as an embourgeois liberal other seeking equality of opportunity, recognition, and distribution with the upper class of owners and high-level executives, which in globalization is no longer exclusively white but phenotypically multicultural (Mocombe, 2012).

The globalization-as-culture group suggests that in the process of acculturating social actors to the organization of their work and consumption patterns within the capitalist world-system, homogenization does not take place. Instead, in the process of integration within the world-system, cultural groups intersubjectively defer meaning in ego-centered communicative discourse to hybridize the lexicons of significations coming out of the globalization process thereby maintaining their cultural discourse and discursive practices not in a commodified form but as a Marxian class-for-itself seeking to partake in the global community as hybrid social actors governed by the liberal rational logic of the marketplace which are culturally neutral.

Contemporarily, the two positions are not mutually exclusive, however, and when synthesized highlight the same position—globalization, via American hegemony represents the economic and cultural homogenization of social discourse and action via hybridization and the “retrenchment of the nation state.” That is, globalization represents the discursive practice, “spirit of capitalism,” of agents of the Protestant ethic, the upper class of owners and high-level executives, seeking to homogenize, through outsourcing, mass mediaization, and consumption patterns, “other” human behaviors and cultures around the globe within the logic and practice of their

metaphysical discourse, “the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism,” so as to accumulate profit, via agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial/consumerist production, for the predestined from the damned. That is, via globalization and the retrenchment of the nation-state system, social actors around the globe are socialized, through state ideological apparatuses such as education and neoliberal market forces, funded by the IMF via the US nation-state, to become social and cultural agents of the Protestant ethic so as to fulfill their labor and consumptive roles in the organization of work required by their nation-state in the global capitalist world-system under American hegemony. Integration via the retrenchment of the nation-state under American global hegemony subsequently leads to economic gain and status for a few predestined, administrative bourgeoisie, or transnational capitalist class, that in-turn become cultural consumers, given the medicalization of society, of bourgeois goods and services from postindustrial societies like America. Hence, proper socialization of the other in the contemporary capitalist American dominated world-system is tantamount to hybridization, i.e., the socialization of the other as a liberal bourgeois Protestant *other* seeking equality of opportunity, recognition, and distribution with their white counterparts within the neoliberal bourgeois Protestant framework of the global capitalist nation-state world-system under American hegemony. This process of social integration and enculturation via hybridization is the legacy or by-product of the black American civil rights movement, led by a liberal hybrid embourgeoisied middle class, on global American capital.

American capital beginning in the 1970s sought to outsource work to other nation-states in order to escape the high cost of labor and environmental laws in the US following the Dwight Eisenhower New Deal Era. Given the new civil rights legislations enacted in the 1960s, as a result of the civil rights movement, to reinforce the American liberal bourgeois Protestant social order without regards to race, creed, nationality, etc. that discourse coupled with outsourcing would be exported to other nation-states. American capital, therefore, sought to hybridized other ethnic cultures the world over via the retrenchment of the nation state and color-blind legislation in order to make social actors of other cultures known for two reasons, to socialize them to the work ethic of the globalizing process and to accumulate surplus-value as American capital sought to service the others of their community as agents of and for capital, i.e., consumers and administrative bourgeoisie controlling production for global capital, for their emerging postindustrial economy focused on financial investment and cultural entertainment provided by commodified poor cultural groups whose identities have been commodified around their class positions for entertainment purposes in postindustrial economies.

Whereas the dominant focus of world-systems analysis and the common sense or neoliberal view, the culture-of-globalization and globalization-as-culture positions, respectively, have been on the exploitative (or not) capitalist

material relations between and within core and periphery states, i.e., the attempt of capital operating in and out of core states to increase the rate of profit through the production of surplus-value and consumption of goods from workers in their respective states and those in developing or periphery countries. The point of emphasis here is on the ideological aspect or the integration of this relation in terms of capitalist ideological domination. This is an important distinction in terms of understanding the capitalist system's social integration. Although the material approach of the (neo)liberal position, globalization-as-culture, views the system or structure of capitalist relations as distinct from the plethora of cultural meanings and subjective experiences, which operate within its rational and "organic" systemic framework, the position here, in keeping with the structural determinism of the world-system school, culture-of-globalization, argues that the contrary is the norm. That is, the capitalist system, and its structural logic and ethic, as expressed in the beliefs and actions of the upper class of owners and high-level executives operating through the state and global institutions, colonizes the lifeworld, the world of day-to-day practical action, to prevent differentiation of norms and subjective experiences from that of the "Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism" by which the global capitalist social relations of production is socially and culturally integrated (Mocombe, 2007, 2013).

From this position, in other words, the view is that in the emerging post-development global setting (globalization), globalizing capitalist core states, like the United States (US) (i.e., the hegemon of the contemporary world-system) and the United Kingdom (UK), the chief architects of the global capitalist world system, no longer rely exclusively on political and military force to extract concessions, or market forces for that matter to reproduce the world-system or the global structure of capitalist social relations amongst their citizens and those in periphery and semi-periphery nation-states. Instead, as Louis Althusser points out in the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (2001), as governing elites in control of the state, as the constitutive element for bourgeois global domination, investors use, and pressure other states to use, state "ideological apparatuses" such as education to *interpellate* (name) and *embourgeois* their "workers and other citizens" with the ideological practices (i.e., discursive practices) that justify, and make acceptable, their role in the investor/worker/consumer relationship that structures the global social relation of production. Through "ideological state apparatuses," such as the media and education, social actors in modern societies are named (interpellated) and given ("embourgeoisied" with) the "ethics" and "practical-consciousness" needed for both their "ontological security" and the reproduction of the structural practices needed for the mode of production by which capital seeks to generate surplus-value or accumulate capital (Mocombe, 2007; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2011).

Thus, "ideological state apparatuses," such as the media and education, in essence, become the force-less means of socialization to the dominant capitalist order of things. So that in the case of education, in countries