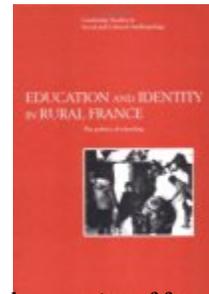


H-Net Reviews

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Deborah Reed-Danahay. *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xiii + 237 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48312-4.

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This book is most interesting at several levels. First, it is a contribution to the ethnography of France and particularly to the ethnography of the French educational system, about which we still know very little from this point of view. Second, and more important, it is a contribution to the general cultural anthropology of what used to be called “modern” or “complex” societies and, eventually, to general anthropological theory. Deborah Reed-Danahay does this by drawing skillful generalizations from her fieldwork in a small village in Auvergne, where she spent a year in 1980-81 (returning in the summer of 1984). Her methodology appears to have been mostly general participant-observation (in the *commune* in general, not only in the school) and some archival work. There is nothing ground-breaking here, and some of the limitations of the analysis may derive from the conservative nature of her techniques. Still, this is mainstream cultural anthropology at its best.

I will resist caricaturing the movement that took Reed-Danahay to a remote rural village, when the majority of the French population probably live in suburban high-rises. In a certain sense, the very remoteness of the village from any political center allows her to argue her basic point: that the powerless in a strong hegemony in fact can be shown to be actively at work resisting those aspects of the hegemony that do not fit their local interests (while accepting those that do fit). In this, Reed-Danahay fits within the mainstream of a strong current in contemporary anthropology, and her book is a worthy contribution to this current. Most daringly, she takes on Pierre Bourdieu’s essentially deductive reasoning about a postulated *miconnaissance de la violence symbolique* [1], which then leads him to his social psychological theory of habitus:

Rather than seeing the educational strategies of families in Laviaille as playing completely into the hands of the dominant classes in France, as Bourdieu seems to do, it makes more sense to view their uses of education in terms of family strategies aimed not simply at “reproduction” but also at adaptation in the face of changing circumstances (p. 152).

She makes a strong argument for this position, and thereby greatly expands the range of Paul Willis’s classic statement in *Learning to Labor* [2]. Uneducated French peasants in small villages in the 1890s, and their somewhat more educated grandchildren three generations later, can be shown to be active participants in shaping the local consequences of hegemonic decisions about compulsory schooling, and about the style and content of this schooling, as they were constructed and mandated in Paris by various intellectuals and political parties. The people of Laviaille may not have had, literally, any say in what happened in Paris that they had to live by. But they continually picked and chose what they would use of what was given to them (most spectacularly, given the usual analysis of gender bias in education, by holding back their boys and pushing their girls).

These strengths suggest that the theoretical challenge could have been more radical. First, it would be necessary to back up. Reed-Danahay does not quite give Bourdieu, and the other theoreticians of social reproduction whom she usually groups with him, their due. Her book does not say anything about their problem, one way or another. Whether the Laviallois did or did not resist, whether they do or do not continue to do so, France did reproduce itself, ideologically and socially, and it inscribed itself ever more deeply on localities like Laviaille. In the political, religious, linguistic, and indeed, educa-

tional spheres, French patterns are not only dominant in Lavalie, they are all there is. Reed-Danahay does not give any example of any local survivals. Indeed most of what she mentions about local self-identification is exactly coterminous with the identification that the rest of France gives of it. I would argue that “les Auvergnats” is a product of French hegemony, not the other way around. As for their resistance (for example their decision not to push their boys), it was clearly useful for the reproduction of the bourgeoisie in the bigger towns.

Minimally, then, her work is a corrective to a misreading of Bourdieu. After all, he did write repeatedly about “strategies” and must be quite aware of the fact that local action is not absolutely determined at the moment of production.[3] Maximally, Reed-Danahay’s work is much more than that, for it should be read as a powerful attack against the very theory of habitus, and by implication, against the use of social psychological explanations in cultural anthropology. To me, her work suggests that understanding social reproduction does not require a recourse to any theory of “disposition inculcated in the earliest years of life.” People can participate in social reproduction with their eyes wide open, if they can in fact satisfy local interests that may not coincide with what social critics might think they are or should be. The problem, for Reed-Danahay, is that she is eventually too attached to such theories (values, identity) for her own explanations. Eventually, then, she fails fully to articulate her theoretical challenge.

This is not the place to sketch where I would suggest she go. What must be done, however, is point out a major methodological weakness in all the anthropological work that mentions “identity” and “values.” The book is full of sentences like “The Lavallois do not reject French identity outright....They are ambivalent about French iden-

tity....They have never wholly embraced the French language or the Republican ideals...” (pp. 152-53). Strictly speaking, how does she know? Does she mean “all the Lavallois”? a majority? some of them? more than other residents of France? Traditional studies in social psychology proceed through systematic surveys and operationalization of concepts like “French identity.” Given the limitations of general participant-observation, there is no way to know what Reed-Danahay is in fact talking about here. There is no entry for any empirical challenge. In the long run, particularly in the context of generalizations that are not so different from those that other disciplines routinely make, the contribution of anthropology will be dismissed. We have no choice but to focus systematically on the processes that do allow us to make general statements on the basis of our techniques.

Any book that allows one to discuss such major issues intelligently deserves much credit. I am more than willing to give it all this credit, and more.

Notes

[1] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, _ La reproduction: Elements pour une theorie du systeme d’enseignement (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1970).

[2] Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977 [1972]).

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