



“We’re all mad here...” Soviet leadership and its impact on education through the looking glass of Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism

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ABSTRACT

Despite a vast body of literature on Soviet leadership, very little work in this field seems to have engaged in a critical discussion about its specific impact on educational practice. This inference prompted the author to revisit the key junctions of her experiences of Soviet social order during 1980s, when she was working as a teacher of English at a primary school in Tbilisi, the capital of the Soviet Georgia. The author’s interest in the field was further piqued by the ambition to take Raymond Williams’s concept of cultural materialism outside its typical application confined to literary theory and use it instead as a tool for dissecting Soviet leadership in the attempt to examine its impact on Soviet educational landscape. The paper aims to substantiate that a broader appropriation of Williams’s ideas of cultural materialism extended beyond its original domain of literary theory, can add a rich stratum to the interpretation of Soviet leadership phenomenon, offering a number of valuable insights into its inherent concepts.

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn’t. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn’t be. And what it wouldn’t be, it would. You see?”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Just like Lewis Carroll’s *Wonderland*, a human society can be seen either as a chaos of incomprehensible absurdity with its unpredictable and unconstrained happenings or as a vibrant, intricate and enigmatic edifice of political, cultural and economic liaisons that require continuous decoding and interpretation. Within this complex structure of human interrelations, culture occupies a special role. The history of human civilisation shows us that it was the conflict of beliefs, values and norms – the main pillars of culture – that fuelled the engine of human development, as different social orders tried to reconcile their dissimilarities through the processes of adaptation, invasion and mutation.

Despite a vast body of literature on Soviet leadership (Gill, 1980; White, 1990; Akiner, 1991; Hirsch, 2005; Rindzeviciute, 2008; Brown, 2009; Kalinina, 2014; Rittersporn, 2014), very little work in this field seems to have engaged in a critical discussion about its specific impact on educational practice. This inference prompted me to revisit the key junctions of my experiences of Soviet social order during 1980s, when I was working as a teacher of English at a primary school in Tbilisi, the capital of the Soviet Georgia. My interest in the field was further piqued by the ambition to take Raymond Williams’s concept of cultural

materialism outside its typical application confined to literary theory and use it instead as a tool for dissecting Soviet leadership in my attempt to examine its impact on Soviet educational landscape. In this paper I shall suggest that a broader appropriation of Williams’s ideas of cultural materialism extended beyond its original domain of literary theory, can add a rich stratum to the interpretation of Soviet leadership phenomenon, offering a number of valuable insights into its inherent concepts as well as presenting a further opportunity of examining in more depth its relevance to the contemporary educational developments.

Making sense of culture

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked, and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

As is the case with many concepts related to social sciences, finding one common definition for the notion of culture has proven to be a mammoth task due to its multi-faceted nature and a resulting diversity of its applications and assigned meanings. Not in any way trying to compete with Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who provided 164 definitions and discursive statements on culture, I nevertheless felt compelled to make another attempt at delving into the subject with the aim of creating a more or less substantiated point of departure for the subsequent discussion.

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Contemporary attempts to define culture seem to be more fruitful when instigated not from a universal standpoint but from a specific disciplinary or ethnographic position. In practical terms, an artist, for example, would probably define culture as a notion related to creative activities; a foreign national, living in the UK, would probably associate it with traditions, language and cuisines; while a historian would most likely see culture as an integral part in the development of human civilization. Remarkably, all three of these descriptions would be true, if we take into consideration the writings of [Raymond Williams \(1983b\)](#), one of the most prominent theorists in the field, who defined three different facets of culture, depending on their broad categories of usage:

... (i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development [...]; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general [...]; (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (p. 90).

Nevertheless, while each of these aspects of culture are going to be discussed separately, it is worth acknowledging here the significance of the overlap in these meanings that ‘indicate a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence’ ([Williams, 1983b, p. 91](#)). This perception of ‘complex and still active history of the word’ (*ibid.*) helped me to accept the impossibility of its adequate formulation while also allowing me some oscillations between its various inferences. Instead, it seemed to be more helpful to focus on a search for its interpretive meanings, as suggested by [Geertz \(1973\)](#), who saw culture as webs of significance that people themselves had spun and got suspended in, presenting the interpretive study of culture as ‘an attempt to come to terms with the diversity of the ways human beings construct their lives in the act of leading them’ ([Geertz, 1983, p. 16](#)). Against this contextual background, and using the Williams’s three dimensions of culture as the focal reference points, I can now turn to the essential subject of this paper – dichotomising the impact of Soviet leadership on education in the Soviet Union through the lens of cultural materialism, starting with identifying the key theoretical features of the latter.

Culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development: theorising Williams’s cultural materialism and Soviet leadership

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Prominent contemporary researchers within the field of leadership and, particularly, educational leadership ([Gunter, 2001](#); [Leithwood and Riehl, 2003](#); [Giroux, 2004](#); [Hatcher, 2008](#); [Bush, 2011](#)) seem to consent that leadership practice cannot be cognised in disjunction from the economic, political and cultural milieus in which it is exercised (“a grin without a cat?”), as leaders act as accomplices in creating and enforcing specific societal orders in the service of particular economic and political systems. Indeed, understanding leadership demands that we apprehend not only its influences on individuals and social institutions, but also the tapestry of underlying base relations of production that allowed the dominance of certain ideas within the heterogeneity of any particular society. As [Williams \(1980\)](#) noted, if leadership practices with their associated ideologies were merely ‘some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is’ (p.37). From this perspective, the concept of Soviet leadership in this paper has been concomitant not with specific leaders’ identities or leadership styles, but has been

comprehended as an all-embracing social pyramid of power that controlled all aspects of social existence in the Soviet Union.

In terms of defining the concept of cultural materialism, throughout his intellectual journey, Williams had always accepted the complexity of the notion of ‘materialism’ as such, stating that

materialism and the associated materialist and materialistic are complex words in contemporary English because they refer (i) to a very long, difficult and varying set of arguments which propose matter as the primary substance of all living and non-living things, including human beings; (ii) to a related or consequent but again highly various set of explanations and judgments of mental, moral and social activities; and (iii) to a distinguishable set of attitudes and activities, with no necessary philosophical and scientific connection, which can be summarized as an overriding or primary concern with the production or acquisition of things and money ([Williams, 1983b, p. 197](#)).

Williams’s cultural materialism shared a good deal of its outlook with its American counterpart – new historicism. As [Williams \(1977\)](#) noted, his position of cultural materialism was ‘a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism’ (p.5). [Dollimore and Sinfield \(1994\)](#) presented a useful interpretation of the differences between the two approaches based on [Marx’s \(1852, p.1\)](#) statement that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances; they make it under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.’ According to [Dollimore and Sinfield \(1994\)](#), cultural materialists focused on people’s powers to intervene in the process of ‘making history’, while new historicists emphasised the restrictions on people’s actions imposed by the powers of social and ideological structures. This construal allowed to place new historicism within a vista that saw history as ‘a safe and approved harbour, a place where one may sleep peacefully, lulled by anecdotal stories, after tossing on the stormy seas of deconstructive and theoretical Marxist uncertainty’ ([Simpson, 1995, p.29](#)), whereas cultural materialists were more likely to challenge existing power structures and offer interpretations of a historical change and its cultural meanings through the concepts of hegemony, ideology and empowerment of marginalised societal groups ([Milner, 1994](#)).

These constituent parts of cultural materialism – hegemony, ideology and marginalised societal groups – make it particularly applicable to the critical analysis of Soviet leadership, which cannot be viewed separately from the issues of power and control, leading to the manipulated consent of the subordinate classes to the dominant (hegemonic) culture. Thus, it is useful to take a closer look at each of these constituent parts within the context of Soviet societal order.

With regard to hegemony, the USSR was led by the Communist Party that was exclusively based upon the ideas of Marxism-Leninism and was organised in a meticulous hierarchical order driven by concomitant ‘nomenklatura’ principles. The Party played a hegemonic role in both political and economic spheres, where all its decisions were accepted in a seemingly ‘unanimous’ way and by open voting at the Party congresses, accompanied by ‘stormy, prolonged applause, occasionally turning into an ovation’ ([White, 1990](#)). This embodiment of the prerogative function of government as a steering wheel for the Party elite was exercised under the slogan of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ ([Marx, 1850, p.27](#)), and continued to infiltrate the Soviet society across all its constituent republics and administrative divisions, blatantly presenting itself as the only recognised and accepted way of existence. Like in [Bhabha’s \(1994\)](#) concept of the ‘Third Space’, Soviet leaders attempted to ignore the ambivalence of individual cultural enunciations of different nations and ethnic minorities within the borders of the Soviet empire, replacing them with the invading syncretism of a new cultural hybridity of ‘Soviet People’ and creating ‘the in-between space that carried the burden of the meaning of culture’ ([Bhabha, 1994, p. 37](#)). This view of Soviet hegemony as a deep penetrative power resonates strongly with [Williams’s \(1983b\)](#) understanding of hegemony

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