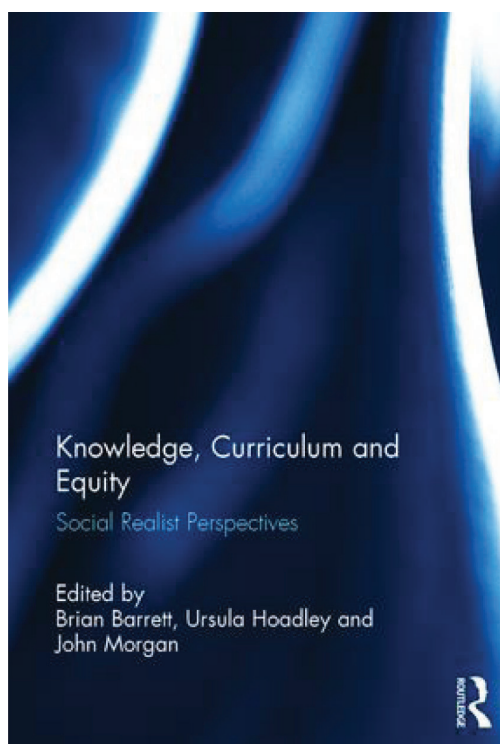


Book review

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Knowledge, Curriculum and Equity: Social realist perspectives, edited by Brian Barrett, Ursula Hoadley and John Morgan

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Educational discourses are inextricably tied into political debates, since education is such a universally prized and costly public merit good. The editors of this book of papers from the 2015 Third International Social Realism Symposium at the University of Cambridge present 13 eclectic pieces under the trinity of 'knowledge, curriculum and equity', a title charged with powerful tension in the UK context of 'knowledge-rich' claims in Whitehall and attendant schools. The familiar trio of the New Labour Party leader and Prime Minister Tony Blair from 1996 onwards was, by contrast, a simplistic repetition of the one word 'education', tied to the achievement of all children rather than the 'few', but leaving nobody clear as to how the elusive equity was to be achieved in the complex school systems of the United Kingdom. The educational reforms of New Labour's 13 years of government did bring in a range of new structures, curriculum changes and injections of funding that did indeed see better outcomes in many schools for an increasing range of young people, but a strong backlash

was lying in wait. After the 2010 general election and the arrival of Gove and Gibb at the (renamed) Department for Education, priorities shifted to the nature of the education offered by schools and demands for a return to allegedly lost standards; knowledge and curriculum became the focus of debate, heavily influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch. The Policy Exchange Unit recently published a volume of papers from a conference held to honour Hirsch, with the duo *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Simons and Porter, 2015) as its title. Salutory comparisons can be made between that and our social realists' volume.

Social justice is the avowed goal of both groups, but the Hirschians prefer it as a silent partner, whereas the social realists have held their trinity centre stage. This *Knowledge, Curriculum and Equity* volume draws on studies from diverse countries, but mainly the United Kingdom, New Zealand and South Africa, with single pieces from Australia, Singapore and the United States. There is a mixture of approaches, with some solidly theoretical papers, some reports of particular research projects, and some pieces that seek to comment directly on the work of teachers in classrooms and the prospects for imminent change. It would most certainly have been an interesting international academic conference. The ideas of Michael Young underpin the volume, and he writes the Foreword, but the approach is humble and reflective, in contrast to the eulogizing of Hirsch that permeates the Policy Exchange document. Young accepts the likelihood of slow progress towards the goal of equity and widening 'epistemic access', which he declares to be the goal for social realists, in contrast to simply widening access to school.

The Policy Exchange is not ready to wait for its changes. The narrow assemblage of authors that it claims 'represent many of today's great education thinkers' (Simons and Porter, 2015: 8) (note: *represent*, not necessarily *are*) present changes taking place in a small number of newly established schools. There are a few critical voices, most notably Professor Chris Husbands, but the overall message of the editors is that the Hirschian 'knowledge revolution' is the acknowledged way forward, and the opening piece by Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, firmly ties government policy to such change. The social realists' volume has only one citation of Hirsch in its index, and the editors describe his core knowledge agenda as an 'appropriation by conservatives'. This is too casual. If they are to make an impact on the transformation of schooling, certainly in the UK, and unite the forces of their trinity, the social realists need to engage with the Hirschian debate and urgently formulate responses to school curricula, pedagogy and assessment that can restrain senior leaders from hasty formulaic 'knowledge-rich' reforms. Morgan and Lambert, in their insightful piece on knowledge in music and geography warn academics about the perils of arriving 'on the scene too late' (p. 34); they remind us that the former *new sociologists of education* instigated debates that 'were restricted to the realm of theory in the academy and had little purchase on educational practice' (p. 34). Some of the authors in this volume seem to have heeded this warning, but it must be imperative for all.

Morgan and Lambert (Chapter 3) lead the way in considering how the knowledge agenda might work in its avowed arenas of school subjects. Their historical account of the social realist story is clear and probably the best of the many attempts within the volume, helped by their engagement with Jones's (2015) critique of *Knowledge and the Future School* (Young et al., 2014). They give a similarly clear account of developments in their respective subjects; the music case was fascinating, and could prompt all educators to consider issues of culture, curriculum and pedagogy, and the geography section shone light on the connection between school subjects and the academy. We can look forward to the 'urgent work' that they recognize has to be done

in broadening out the debate about knowledge and schools to other subjects and participant groups.

Yates's work on history as a school subject (Chapter 4) follows on nicely from Morgan and Lambert, and she starts to engage with both the political and academic worlds with regard to choices about what kind of knowledge should feature in school history. She uses research into perceptions of Australian academics and schoolteachers to inform her discussion. Her thinking about Youngian 'powerful knowledge' in history is perceptive and affirms that the academic disciplinary approach to the subject cannot fully shape the curriculum in schools; it needs to be considered alongside social purposes and effects, since the selection of content will unavoidably have implications for student identity and values. Ormond's paper (Chapter 7) is also on history, this time in New Zealand, and there is again consideration of the contribution of disciplinary approaches to school history. However, Ormond's work shines less light on the issue of equity and history. Her study was based on a small sample of teachers and their views on knowledge and curriculum, and although there was mention of the connection of history and identity for some of their students, the teachers did not emphasize subject choices in relation to social and cultural challenges in a diverse New Zealand society.

Lim's piece on Singapore (Chapter 9) was most engaging and informative. He revealed a good deal about the context, so the reader can appreciate the particularities of Singapore, and showed the tensions within this small, vibrant and enterprising society, which could end up as a place of contradiction or of skilful juxtaposition. Bernsteinian theory and lesson observations were blended nicely, and it was intriguing to hear from an oppositional student in one class, given the tightly controlled socio-political context. The place of 'critical thinking' within school curricula and pedagogical subjects has universal application, and it would be valuable for all educators to consider this work.

The South African papers presented particular curriculum contexts, as well as some overarching discussion about educational thinking in the new nation. It was interesting to read in Muller and Hoadley's Chapter 6 about the different influences on South African educational thinking, reminding us that the Americans and British are not the only world thinkers in education. These studies will be interesting for the specialists in their areas, but not core reading for UK educators tackling the current knowledge issues.

It is clear from Michael Young's Foreword and the editors' Introduction to this volume that they want to contribute to meaningful educational change, and believe in the powerful combination of knowledge and curriculum in the pursuit of equity. Young *et al.* (2014) attested to social realists' concerns with the immediate realities of schools. In that vein, there are practice-focused chapters in this volume that can inform and inspire educators in a range of fields to pursue the 'riches of knowledge' for all young people. However, if the social realists want to influence the transformation of school experiences, they need to have something of the clarity, drive and purpose of the Policy Exchange approach if the latter is not going to determine a narrow 'knowledge-rich' bandwagon that schools feel they have to join. Academics rightly shun the haste of political careerists, but the social realists need to clarify what their 'powerful knowledge curricula' could look like, and what kinds of pedagogy and assessment would be appropriate for meaningful social justice results. Otherwise, Young, Morgan and Lambert may be lamenting after the next decade that the social realists' deliberations allowed for the triumph of too many '*Back to the Future* schools'.

References

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