

Edited by
Karl Maton and Rob Moore

Social Realism, Knowledge and the Sociology of Education

Coalitions of the Mind

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Introduction

Coalitions of the Mind

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. . . thinking consists in making 'coalitions of the mind,' internalised from social networks, motivated by the energies of social interactions.

(Collins, 2000, p. 7)

This book offers a fresh way of thinking about education that provides knowledge about knowledge. It comprises key papers by leading authors of 'social realism' in the sociology of education, a broad school of thought achieving prominence across a range of national contexts, including Australia, France, Singapore, South Africa and the United Kingdom. This school offers an alternative to approaches that have dominated educational thinking in recent decades, such as constructivism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. Though the relativizing consequences of these approaches have been increasingly questioned from a variety of directions, social realism goes further than criticism. It offers constructive concepts and ideas for moving beyond entrenched positions in both theoretical understanding and empirical research. In doing so, this emerging approach provides a way out of an impasse that has debilitated sociological thinking about knowledge and education for decades.

This impasse reflects the peculiar difficulty the sociologies of knowledge and education have with the very idea of knowledge. The basis of this problem is a longstanding belief in these fields in an 'epistemological dilemma' (Alexander 1995), an assumption that the only choice is between positivist absolutism or constructivist relativism (see Chapter 1 of this volume). This constructs a false dichotomy between, on the one hand, the belief that knowledge must be decontextualized, value-free, detached and 'objective'

and, on the other hand, the idea that knowledge is socially constructed within particular cultural and historical conditions (and necessarily entwined with issues of interest and power). Faced with this ‘either/or’, the sociologies of knowledge and education, since at least the early 1970s, have focused more on unmasking and debunking knowledge claims than on exploring the social grounds for objectivity in knowledge or the autonomy of knowledge-producing fields. Indeed, the very possibility of such objectivity or autonomy is often denied. As the chapters in this collection highlight, this false dichotomy has deleterious implications for understanding education, for policy and practice, and for social justice.

A major concern for the social realist school is to replace this ‘either/or’ with a refined and developed ‘both/and’. This alternative view recognizes, *contra* positivism, the inescapably social character of knowledge but, *contra* constructivism, does not take this to inevitably entail relativism. In other words, rational objectivity in knowledge is acknowledged as itself a fact (we do actually have knowledge) but it is also recognized as a *social* phenomenon (it is something that people do in socio-historical contexts) and it is *fallible* rather than absolute or merely relative. This allows knowledge to be seen in itself, not merely as a reflection of either some essential truth or social power but as something in its own right, whose different forms have effects for intellectual and educational practices. This can seem an obvious point to make: knowledge is the very basis of education as a social field of practice; it is the production, recontextualization, teaching and learning of *knowledge* that makes education a distinct field. However, ironically, knowledge as an object is missing from approaches that have dominated the sociology of education. Having a *theory* of knowledge is not a necessary condition for having knowledge itself; as Ernest Gellner (1992a) argued, we *know* we have knowledge but we are not always quite sure how. Nonetheless, to understand education we need to understand knowledge. Social realism puts *knowledge as an object* centre-stage in thinking about education. This is not to fetishize or view knowledge as the *only* object but rather to recover and reclaim this crucial yet missing dimension of education. Doing so raises questions of the characteristics that enable knowledge to be created and developed over time, the modes of this creation and development, the forms this knowledge takes, and their effects for policies and practices. These form the principal concerns of the chapters brought together in this collection. So, what are the principal ideas associated with social realist approaches? Rather than *précis* arguments addressed in greater detail throughout the book, here we shall sketch some of the broad themes

that underlie these chapters and their implications for knowledge and education.

Social Realism, Knowledge and Education

One way of understanding the shift in perspective that brings knowledge as an object into view is provided by a distinction Williams (2002) makes between 'truth' and 'truthfulness'. 'Truth' is based on the notion that some knowledge claims can be considered more epistemologically powerful than others. That is not to say such knowledge is unchanging, eternal Truth, but rather there are rational grounds for comparing the relative merits of knowledge claims in terms of their explanatory power. Williams describes 'truthfulness' as a 'reflex against deceptiveness' and a 'pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lie behind them' (2002, p. 1). At its most general, such a reflex is part of the academic mindset – the desire to get beneath appearances. However, this commitment can become realized in ways that obscure the very thing being studied.

In the sociology of education the reflex to truthfulness has often been associated with debunking knowledge claims and the 'critical' deconstruction of the 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' curriculum. Typically, the aim is to reveal that 'official' knowledge is not what it claims to be but rather reflects the disguised interests and experiences of a dominant social group. As this aim has become itself dominant within educational research, the notion of 'truth' has become occluded by the desire to enact 'truthfulness'. Nonetheless, as Williams argues, truthfulness itself presupposes a deeper commitment to truth:

If you do not really believe in the existence of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for? Or – as we might also put it – in pursuing truthfulness what are you supposedly being true to? This is not an abstract difficulty or just a paradox. It has consequences for real politics, and it signals a danger that our intellectual activities, particularly in the humanities, may tear themselves to pieces. (2002, p. 2)

In other words, a preoccupation with truthfulness that eclipses interest in truth undermines the very basis of that passion for truthfulness. This has been the fate of approaches dominant in the sociology of education over recent

decades (see Chapters 3 and 6). From the radical social constructivism of the early 1970s, through waves of feminism and multiculturalism to post-structuralism and postmodernism, the passion for truthfulness has dominated at the expense of the passion for truth. As a result, knowledge as an object of study in its own right has been obscured. Ironically, the result is that truth and knowledge have become the dominated, silenced Others. The very basis of intellectual and educational practice is thus missing from the picture of education.

Knowledge as real

In contrast to previously dominant approaches, social realism does not construct truth and truthfulness as opposed, as an either/or, but rather embodies a passion for *both* truth *and* truthfulness. Social realist approaches aim to see through appearances to the real structures that lie behind them but acknowledge that these structures are more than the play of social power and vested interests. This position can be described as based on what critical realist philosophy terms ‘ontological realism’, ‘epistemological relativism’ and ‘judgemental rationality’ (e.g. Archer et al. 1998). First, the principle of *ontological realism* involves the recognition that knowledge is about something other than itself: there exists a reality beyond our symbolic realm. This ‘otherness’ of independently existing realities, both natural and social, provides an independent, external limit not on what we can believe (we can believe whatever we like, such as in fairies at the bottom of the garden) but rather on what we can *know*. We, as individuals, can believe in anything, but we collectively cannot in the same way *know* just anything. Secondly, *epistemological relativism* acknowledges that this knowledge is not necessarily universal, invariant, essential Truth – we can ‘know’ the world only in terms of socially produced knowledges which change over time and across socio-cultural contexts. Thus the nature of knowledge as an object, its forms and their modes of change, is crucial for understanding our subjective knowledge and what we can say we ‘know’ about the world. Lastly, epistemological relativism does not imply judgemental relativism, the view that we cannot judge between different knowledges. Rather, *judgemental rationality* holds that there are rational, intersubjective bases for determining the relative merits of competing knowledge claims. This is central to social realism in education: one of its key concerns is with how ‘we’, that is, humanity, come to produce knowledge. What makes this *social* realism is that in contrast to traditional

epistemology as represented by positivism, for example, the concern is not with the logical properties of knowledge claims but with the collective procedures through which judgements are produced against the background constraints of the real.

Though drawing here on critical realist terms, the concerns of social realism in education are more substantive than philosophical – its focus lies with the properties of knowledge-producing fields of social practice and its problematic concerns the structured principles and procedures developed in those fields that provide the basis for rational objectivity in knowledge. Here the social realist position represents, as we stated earlier, an alternative to the ‘epistemological dilemma’ of choosing between positivist absolutism or constructivist relativism. This false dichotomy suggests one analyse either the formal and epistemological properties of knowledge or the play of power among actors in the social contexts of its production. Similarly, it suggests at the level of curriculum and pedagogy that the only important factor is either transmitting knowledge or valorizing the learner’s experiences. One approach neglects the social in favour of focusing on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of knowledge; the other neglects knowledge in favour of focusing on ‘who’ is speaking or learning (they exclusively address either the ‘epistemic relation’ or ‘social relation’ of knowledge, respectively; see Chapter 2). Instead, social realism views knowledge-producing fields as comprising *both* relational structures of concepts and methods for relating these to the empirical world *and* actors positioned in institutions within specific social and historical contexts. In contrast to hegemonic approaches in the sociology of education, this recognizes that knowledge involves more than social power; it also involves epistemic power.

This alternative vision is enabled by understanding that knowledge is *emergent from but irreducible to* the practices and contexts of its production and recontextualization, teaching and learning. As Moore puts it,

[A] crucial distinction must be made between [the production of knowledge and its emergent properties, i.e. knowledge is socially produced, but at the same time has the capacity to transcend the social conditions under which it is produced. (2000, p. 32)

This is to say that knowledge is *both* social *and* has emergent properties that transcend and ‘react back’ on social contexts and practices. Thus ‘social realism’ does not denote that only the social is real (and not the natural), as if opposed to a more encompassing form of realism. Rather, ‘realism’ can be understood as superseding ‘constructivism’ – as Young puts it in

the sub-title of his book (2008), ‘from social constructivism to social realism’. It signals a shift from viewing knowledge in terms of *construction* – especially when this implies we can construct the world as we see fit, free of the consequences of how the world will react back on that construction – towards a focus on its *production* within relatively autonomous fields of practice according to socially developed and applied procedures that may have both arbitrary *and* non-arbitrary bases. It thus highlights a concern with the *sociality* of knowledge in terms of how knowledge is created (‘social’) and emphasizes that knowledge is more than simply produced – its modalities help shape the world (‘realism’). This capacity is given by its ‘objective’ nature, by which is not meant its ‘certainty’ but rather its nature as an object in its own right that has real effects. The different forms taken by structures of knowledge have different effects. Social realism offers a language for theorizing these different forms with a view to exploring these effects, such as for the capacity for intellectual fields to build powerful and cumulative knowledge over time (Chapters 2, 3 and 6), the professional role of the teacher and models of professional identity (Chapter 4), how different groups of pupils can access different forms of knowledge (Chapter 5) and inclusion in cultural debates (Chapters 7 and 8). Thus, concerns which at one level might seem to be rather abstract issues in the rarefied realms of epistemology or the theory of knowledge translate into practical issues in educational theory and practice.

The educational dilemma

The epistemological dilemma is not only damaging to our understanding of education, it also plays out in education with damaging results. As Freebody et al. (2008, p. 189) argue, over the past thirty years institutional changes in initial teacher training have been accompanied by more emphasis in teacher preparation and research on the processes of ‘learning’ (rather than ‘learning *this*’) or the social and cultural nature of ‘the learner’ (rather than ‘the learner faced with *this*’) – knowledge has been sidelined in favour of knowing or knowers. While this has moved educational thinking forward from its overly learner-decentred past, it has also propagated a radical scepticism towards knowledge. At the level of curriculum this scepticism is reflected in constructivist beliefs that the disciplinary basis of a subject-based curriculum is arbitrary and specialist expertise merely a power play. ‘Knowledge’ is often viewed as undifferentiated – ‘generic’ skills or interchangeable packets of information – and the

basis of its selection and sequencing in a curriculum seen as arbitrary. At the level of pedagogy, this position can be heard in the view that how such knowledge is taught, learned and assessed is similarly arbitrary, that teaching is processual and divorced from the form of knowledge being taught, and that the authority of teachers is based solely on social position and unrelated to possessing knowledge. There is, from this view, little reason for the forms taken by curriculum or pedagogy beyond historical and cultural conventions – one can begin studying physics by learning quantum mechanics, howsoever one pleases, enabled by anyone sufficiently proficient at facilitating learning. Such knowledge-blindness is also realized in debates over information and communication technologies where the universality of ‘learning’ (understood generically) in everyday life is held to signal a need to dismantle formal educational institutions. When enacted as policy, these beliefs that there exist no differences between everyday and educational knowledge, and between different forms of educational knowledge, result in the deprofessionalization of teaching (see Chapter 4), withhold powerful knowledge from the very people who need it most (Chapter 5) and impoverish the wider cultural sphere (Chapters 7 and 8).

In contrast, while acknowledging the significance of convention and social power, social realism also highlights the differentiation of knowledge and the role this plays in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. This position has profound implications for education. First, if knowledge is not epiphenomenal but real, differentiated and possessing emergent structural qualities, then it follows that curriculum and pedagogy should be structured to take account of those qualities, such as the sequencing of knowledge through a curriculum. Social realism acknowledges differences between the logics of intellectual production and educational reproduction – the practices found in a physics research laboratory are not the same as those found in a physics classroom. However, it does not thereby sever relations between the two. There may be good reasons for why some subjects are typically organized in curricula and taught differently to others. Absolutism would essentialize and fix these differences; relativism would dismiss them as merely arbitrary. Exploring their reasons and sifting the arbitrary (such as historical convention) from the non-arbitrary (the effects of an ontological imperative) is a key issue for ongoing and future social realist research.

Secondly, if there are rational grounds for judging knowledge claims that are more than arbitrary expressions of power, then it follows that some forms of knowledge are more epistemologically (or aesthetically) powerful than others and that curriculum and pedagogy should, again, be structured

to take account of such hierarchies (which are not identical with social hierarchies). This would, for example, militate against forms of assessment that aim to avoid evaluating the content knowledge of learners.

Thirdly, if the above points hold, then in liberal democratic societies it follows that all citizens should be provided with equality of access to the most powerful forms of knowledge through the means that most reliably enable that access. This militates against pedagogic practices which aim to simply celebrate the experiences of students and which fall into (as Maton in Chapter 8 quotes Hoggart) ‘that sloppy relativism which doesn’t stretch *any* student because “they are all, in their own ways, doing wonderfully”’ (1969, in 1982, p. 12). Of course, the means for enabling access to powerful forms of knowledge are likely to vary according to the different social backgrounds those citizens bring to education but they will also vary according to the forms of knowledge involved.

All this involves a recognition that intellectual and educational practices necessarily involve hierarchies, that hierarchies are not always and everywhere social and arbitrary, and that expertise is not antithetical to democracy and social justice. Popper (1983) argued that progress in productive intellectual fields is shown by the problems they create, and these general principles pose more problems than they resolve, but they are problems with which social realism is actively engaging, with a commitment to both truth and truthfulness.

Social realism for social justice

Knowing about knowledge is not just an epistemological or educational matter. The dichotomy of absolutism or relativism also has a political dimension; to repeat Williams: it ‘has consequences for real politics’ (2002, p. 2). The notion that knowledge is decontextualized and value-free is associated with conservative positions, and relativizing attempts to unmask the power behind knowledge are self-described as ‘critical’ and radical. Arguments for studying knowledge as an object or, worse, defending the notion of values in culture (see Chapters 7 and 8) are then often heard as the voice of reactionary conservatism. Again, social realism aims to move beyond this false dichotomy by offering a non-relativistic but socially progressive alternative.

Social realist authors are, of course, not alone in engaging with the troubling consequences of relativism, consequences that reach far beyond education. A number of books have brought this issue to a wider audience, such as Frank Furedi’s (2004) *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?*, Francis

Wheen's (2004) *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* and Benson and Stangroom's (2006) *Why Truth Matters*. Such interventions are energized by a desire to recover respect for the concept of truth and the principles of rational objectivity in both intellectual circles and the public sphere. Furedi, for example, proclaims:

The prevailing level of education, culture and intellectual debate is important for the flourishing of a democratic ethos. Intellectuals in different guises play a crucial role in initiating dialogue and engaging the curiosity and passion of the public. Today that engagement is conspicuously feeble. Unsurprisingly, the cultural elites' cynicism towards knowledge and truth has been transmitted to the people through educational and cultural institutions and the media. Apathy and social disengagement are symptoms of a culture that tends to equate debate with the banal exchange of technical opinions. Because all of this really matters, a culture war against the philistines is long overdue. (2004, p. 24)

The polemical language and call to arms of such writers as Furedi may sometimes provoke their mislabelling as reactionary, but they call attention to the wider import of neglecting knowledge. In particular, they highlight a peculiar reversal whereby progressive forces historically claimed to have Reason and Truth on their side but have now rejected the authority of Reason and abandoned Truth to the forces of reaction. Both the broader argument of intellectuals in the public sphere and the more specific arguments represented in this volume reflect a mood captured by Lopez and Potter (2001, p. 4) when arguing that 'one can say that a new and different intellectual direction must come after postmodernism, simply because postmodernism is inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in'. Why it is inadequate is illustrated by Baggini with reference to the events of 11 September 2001 and their consequences:

On that date, the 'real world' stamped its imprint on the collective consciousness of the West. It demonstrated that which had previously been argued by postmodernism's critics: that to deny the existence of objective reality and celebrate that denial is politically dangerous and intellectually lazy. (2002, p. 10)

In these terms, the problem of knowledge is urgent. In celebrating what Gellner (1992b) called the suicide of reason, too many intellectuals have been happy to cut away the branch upon which they perch, namely a belief

in ‘the value of truth’ (Williams 2002, pp. 6–7). Without truth, truthfulness leads to outcomes that harm the very causes in whose name it is espoused. Fields such as the sociology of education (Chapters 3 and 6) and cultural studies (Chapters 2 and 8) have, as Williams warns, torn themselves to pieces, resulting in intellectual fragmentation, political toothlessness and deleterious educational outcomes. Social realism attempts to recover knowledge in the service of progress and social justice. The impulse underlying social realist work is towards both the creation of epistemologically more powerful forms of knowledge and establishing the means to enable them to be accessible to everyone.

A Coalition of Minds

We have referred to social realism as a ‘school of thought’, but it is more accurately described as a coalition of minds rather than a self-identifying or conscious group. There are differences of focus, emphasis, theoretical influence, affiliation and so on, among those who can be heuristically described as ‘social realists’. Moreover, the term itself drifted into use as convenient shorthand – it was neither determined by committee nor deliberately defined. Social realism is, though, a genuine coalition in the sense of collaboration and constructive engagement. What unites these disparate authors is not only how seriously they take knowledge as an object but also their engagement in an unfolding dialogue that itself models the very thing they study. Durkheim stated:

Collective representations are the product of an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time; to make them, a multitude of different minds have associated, intermixed, and combined their ideas and feelings; long generations have accumulated their experience and knowledge. (1967, p. 15)

Durkheim’s description encapsulates both a central concern of this book and the nature of the social realist enterprise: a key aspect of the process of knowledge production and development is its sociality, the way in which people are related in that process, whether through direct engagement or indirectly through participation in a shared intellectual field. Because constructivist and post-structuralist approaches see only power at play, they cannot fully understand the social nature of knowledge. The argument

being developed in this book is *not* that knowledge is not social, but that these approaches cannot provide an adequate account of the character of its sociality. By overfocusing on the social (in terms of power relations) and neglecting knowledge they paradoxically neglect a crucial dimension of the social in knowledge and education. Durkheim's quote also highlights how the work of knowledge production is both highly personal and inescapably collective; or as Collins puts it,

The intellectual alone, reading or writing: but he or she is not mentally alone. His or her ideas are loaded with social significance because they symbolize membership in existing and prospective coalitions in the intellectual network. (2000, pp. 51–2)

These quotes exemplify the way productive intellectual fields comprise a coalition of minds extending across time and space in which individuals engage in both internalized coalitions of the mind and direct interpersonal engagements. The papers collected together in this volume embody such an intellectual exchange, one that has developed over the past decade in the sociology of education. The book is thereby not only about the social nature of knowledge but also embodies that social nature.

Unlike 'post-' theories, social realism does not proclaim a radical break with the past or with other contemporary ideas. This coalition of minds extends backwards in time and across a range of current intellectual developments to embrace the ideas of a number of key figures from:

- sociology, especially the intellectual tradition inspired by Emile Durkheim (who has often been misread as a positivist rather than a realist), such as the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins;
- philosophy, including Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, Ernest Gellner and Bernard Williams; and
- linguistics, especially the systemic functional linguistics of Michael Halliday and its development through the work of such luminaries of the 'Sydney School' as Jim Martin.

The most immediate influence on social realism, however, has been the sociology of Basil Bernstein. This influence is made explicit throughout the chapters of the book. It suffices to say here that, above all, his ideas serve as a principal starting point for social realist thinking and continue to provide a source of inspiration for its development. Bernstein's ideas

provide a central thread through the book because, as many of the chapters highlight, they bring knowledge into view and provide the basis for a language with which to study this crucial object of study.

Intellectual coalitions, Collins suggests, are ‘motivated by the energies of social interactions’ (2000, p. 7). Social realism has similarly been motivated by a series of interpersonal associations among its protagonists. These initially coalesced at the end of the 1990s through discussions among, among others, John Beck, Karl Maton, Rob Moore and Joe Muller, and a series of publications, the titles of which illustrate their focus, such as *Reclaiming Knowledge* (Muller 2000), ‘For knowledge’ (Moore 2000) and ‘Recovering pedagogic discourse’ (Maton 2000). As these suggest, the initial focus was often on the structural features of knowledge, not to obscure pedagogy or negate agency but rather to bring these into the light so as to explore their implications for such issues as pedagogy and agency. These publications then led to further engagements; for example, Maton’s analysis of the fragmenting effects for intellectual fields of basing knowledge claims on attributes of knowers (Chapter 2 of this volume) resonated with the work of Moore and Muller tracing such effects through the history of the sociology of education (Chapter 3), a paper that in turn prompted Michael Young to publish a response evaluating the gains and losses in the field enabled by such positions (2000b). Such exchanges also scrolled outwards into a wider space where new actors enter the conversation via publications, personal communications and face-to-face encounters at international symposia, constituting what Collins (2000) calls ‘interaction ritual chains’. For example, what can be described as a ‘second wave’ of participants came together in July 2008 with such ‘kindred spirits’ as critical realist philosophers for an international symposium in Cambridge University, and in December 2008 a three-day interdisciplinary conference at the University of Sydney brought together social realist sociologists and systemic functional linguists to address *Disciplinarity, Knowledge and Language*. There is thus now a genuinely international and interdisciplinary network of networks engaging to varying degrees with the social realist problematic, including participants of the biennial *Bernstein International Symposium*, systemic linguists, critical realists and others.

The chapters collected here, many of which have been revised for this publication, are thus but illustrative of a wider intellectual enterprise that is evolving and expanding. They also highlight the different though overlapping forms of intellectual work in a productive field, including mapping, critique, concept-building and application. Chapter 1 by Moore and Young provides a mapping of orientations towards knowledge within policy

and education debates, reconfiguring the conventional understanding of positions within these fields to reveal their underlying commonalities and differences and bringing to light positions obscured by the default settings of debates, in particular the neglected dimension of knowledge. Chapter 2 by Maton introduces new conceptual tools for analysing knowledge and understanding the nature and consequences of these orientations, in particular the effects of basing knowledge claims on membership of social categories of knowers, taking British cultural studies as an illustrative example. Chapter 3 by Moore and Muller brings these concerns together within an analysis of how these issues have played out in the sociology of education. Chapter 4 by Beck and Chapter 5 by Wheelahan extend the intellectual connections of social realist work outwards to Durkheim and to critical realism, and apply these expanded ideas to critique educational policies in the United Kingdom and Australia. Chapter 6 by Young and Muller returns to the concerns of Chapters 1 and 3 by tracing through the gains and losses of the sociology of education, bringing in more fully the later work of Basil Bernstein and critiquing its capacity for addressing disciplines beyond the natural sciences. Chapter 7 by Moore and Chapter 8 by Maton take up this challenge to address the arts and humanities. Moore focuses on a widely discussed instance of relativizing knowledge claims in the arts, while Maton develops Bernstein's model to explore the culture wars and the possibilities for knowledge-building in the arts and humanities.

As with any collection, other papers could have been selected (many of which are cited in the chapters), but this selection provides insights into the multifaceted, evolving and dialogic nature of the field, bringing together for the first time key papers that map, critique and conceptualize knowledge and which have been influential in shaping the ongoing and future social realist project. Like that of all productive intellectual fields, this story is unfinished. All these papers are characterized by a desire to forge a wider, more democratic and intellectually fruitful conversation – we hope that this collection, whatever your intellectual persuasion, motivates you to productively engage with this open coalition of open minds.