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The Life and Times of Michael Young: from the new sociology of education to socialist realism in English schooling

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ABSTRACT This article defends Michael Young from accusations of simple revisionism, and reasserts the need for the socialist left to debate the nature and importance of school knowledge and of subject disciplines.

Misreading Michael Young

In October 2018, the *Guardian*'s education supplement published an article profiling the career of Michael Young, Professor of the Sociology of Curriculum at University College London (UCL). The article charted what its author, Peter Wilby, sees as Young's dramatic shift from being a countercultural figure on the educational left to an alleged supporter of Michael Gove's narrow view of the National Curriculum. Wilby is not the first to level this charge at Young.

For Wilby, Young's 1971 edited volume *Knowledge and Control* initiated an important set of debates about the nature of school knowledge and how school subjects served to perpetuate long-standing educational inequalities. It came at a time when a younger generation of sociologists of education were questioning the role of their field in relation to the goal of promoting educational opportunity among working-class students (Flude & Ahier, 1974). Wilby contrasts Young's critique of established subject teaching in schools on the grounds that it reflected the interests of powerful groups in society (i.e. the middle classes) and thus served to disempower and alienate working-class children with his later position, represented most fully by a collection of essays in his 2008 *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, in which Young explicitly rejects his former position and calls for powerful knowledge (roughly interpreted as 'the best that has been thought and said') to be taught to all students.

The *Guardian* piece takes some cheap shots. For instance, Wilby reverts to the simple narrative of generational shift, as a former radical recants and reveals himself to be a conservative after all, and, linked to this, points to the fact of Young's own private schooling and 'upper-class' origins. These points have the unfortunate effect of diverting readers from more significant ideas and arguments, so that the claim that Young's recent position is identical to that of the US educator E.D. Hirsch risks appearing as fact. In reality, Young's own position in relation to knowledge is more complex, and cannot be separated from his own socialism.

In suggesting that *Knowledge and Control*, a book widely associated with the call for the collapsing of subject boundaries, is 'radical', while *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, which reasserts the importance of subject knowledge, is 'conservative', the *Guardian* article reverts to what Rob Moore (2004) described as the 'default settings' of educational discourse in Britain. But this misreads Young, and in this article I want to reassert Michael Young's socialist credentials. This is important because: (a) Young's career deserves to be considered holistically; and (b) the arguments and debates that surround his work have important implications for those on the educational left who call themselves socialists.

The Knowledge and Control Moment

As Wilby notes in his article, Michael Young understands his work as part of a socialist project. He is a lifelong (if at times ambivalent) member of the Labour Party, and has described the context of his work in the following terms:

> It was a period that really began for me in the late 1950s and early 1960s with all the optimism and sense of possibility of that time. Many of us on the left not only opposed the inhumanities of capitalism but believed that socialism was a real future possibility; history, we thought, was on 'our side'. It was this belief in the changeability of things that I brought to my politics, and later to my thinking about the curriculum. This optimism about change, however, was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by a sense of defeat brought about by the collapse of progressive movements throughout the world and by the failure of attempts to build a socialist society. (Young, 2009, p. 220)

This helps us to understand something about the motivations behind *Knowledge and Control* and its call for 'new directions' in the sociology of education. Young was born in the 1930s, and came of political age in the 1950s through his involvement in the nuclear disarmament movement. The political mood at that time was one of optimism. The left had gained some influence, and there were high hopes that the elitism and exclusions of British society would be challenged and defeated. There was a redistribution of esteem from the middle to the working classes, and the hope was that the gradual extension of the

educational franchise would lead to the establishment of the classless society. The conduit for this was a Labour government committed to equality of opportunity and the policy of comprehensive schooling.

However, as early as the mid-1960s this optimism was being tested. Economically, the slow-down in the rate of profit was becoming a challenge, and educational sociologists, who had been welcome at the table of policy makers, were beginning to question the assumptions of Fabian gradualism. This was all coated with a layer of student activism. In terms of sociology, Basil Bernstein had published his work on socio-linguistics and had pointed to the way in which the educational experiences of working-class students were linked to the micro-processes of family and classroom interactions. This drew attention to the 'black box' of school and classroom processes. In France, Pierre Bourdieu had completed the empirical work for his famous book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), which drew attention to the ways in which cultural capital was produced and distributed. Young, as a relatively new scholar, was charged with editing the collection of essays from the 1968 BSA conference at Durham, which eventually emerged as *Knowledge and Control*. There should have been no surprise at this. There was a paradigm shift taking place in sociology as a new generation of scholars was challenging the old (e.g. Gouldner, 1969). This was not welcomed by all. For example, the papers from the BSA conference were published in Brown (1973), but that book does not make the case for 'new directions in the sociology of education'. Things got polarised: new scholars were more prepared to ask the question of how previously accepted terms were constructed. Thus, terms such as 'crime', 'deviance' and 'education' – apparently common-sense terms – were now seen as social constructions. Today, of course, we are used to this as a mode of thought, but it is important to stress its novelty in the early 1970s.

Reading *Knowledge and Control* now, it is hard to believe that it could be called a radical text that represented a socialist revolution in education (Peal, 2014; Hammersley, 2016). It was part of an intellectual paradigm shift, yes; but from the start it was linked to a whole set of arguments about the direction of the British left. Thus, it is no coincidence that the BSA conference took place in the same year as the *May Day Manifesto* (May Day Manifesto Committee, 1968) was published, which contained a call for a common curriculum, but which also marked the point at which the left was realising the limits of the Labour Party's capacity to change capitalism (Rustin, 2017). The cultural Marxism of the New Left was facing direct challenge from the structuralism inspired by Althusser, whose famous essay on ideology as state apparatus was also published in English in 1971 (Althusser, 1971). The question of whether education could be an agent of change or whether it operated as a tool of state ideology loomed large, especially as the economy took a downward turn, and as the New Right assumed a more virulent form. Keith Joseph (later to figure as an architect of educational reform) spoke in 1974 of Britain as a 'decadent dystopia', and included schools and teachers in the list of institutions and professions that were said to be lowering standards and encouraging moral laxity. For some

educators, the response was to shift to the left, signalled in Bowles and Gintis's (1976) book *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and the Open University course reader *Schooling and Capitalism* (Dale et al, 1976).

In terms of its contents, *Knowledge and Control* contained both 'idealist' and 'structuralist' arguments, and these had important implications for the direction of subsequent curriculum debate. As his retrospective quote suggests, Young at that time was perhaps idealist, hopeful about the possibilities of curriculum change. It is interesting to speculate that this was the source of the tension that Young has referred to in his relationship with Bernstein (as Wilby suggests, Bernstein thought that Young 'took things too far'). My own interpretation of this is that Young was concerned with the question of how these ideas about the sociology of educational knowledge might be translated into curricula, and his work sparked a series of ideology critiques. Young's optimism on this was countered by a series of rebukes, from his colleague Whitty (1974) and from his students Sarup (1978) and Sharp (1981). By 1976 Young had shifted his position, and the introduction to the little-cited *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge* (Whitty & Young, 1976) spoke of the difficulty of having curriculum change without a change in the wider economic and social structures. The definitive statement of this position is found in the 1977 edited collection *Society, State and Schooling* (Young & Whitty, 1977), a book that rejected the idealism of much of the phenomenologically inspired *Knowledge and Control*, and posited a more overtly politicised and Marxist conception of the breakdown of existing relations between school and society. Prepared against the backdrop of Callaghan's Labour government requesting a bail-out from the International Monetary Fund, and the inauguration of the so-called Great Debate in education which signalled a greater willingness of governments to intervene in educational issues, Young and Whitty's final editorial comment asserts that classroom struggles have to be 'articulated by socialist teachers in the context of working-class politics if they are to be more than easily crushed diversions'.

The legacy of *Knowledge and Control* is important. Although many who cited it may not have read it (my own copy was retrieved from a pile of books that were being discarded in an office clear-out in the early 2000s), its key message that school knowledge is selective and that it reflects the interests of the powerful attained the status of something like an accepted truth in the 1980s in the form of a series of ideology critiques that moved beyond social class to encompass gender, sexuality, race and disability. This gained further traction through the work of Foucault and the idea that knowledge was a form of power. As Rob Moore argued, the default settings of educational discourse are that epistemological relativism is associated with progressive or radical education and the focus on boundaries is seen as conservative and traditional. This goes some way to explaining the reaction of many on the educational left to the National Curriculum, or what Stephen Ball (1993) memorably termed 'the curriculum of the dead'. The challenge for 'radical' teachers became to interrupt or deconstruct the stable categories of the curriculum text.

The Bringing Knowledge Back In Moment

It is this set of assumptions that explains why Young's recent work – symbolised for many by his 2008 book *Bringing Knowledge Back In* – is seen by some as a repudiation of his previous position and a dangerous veering towards conservatism. In Wilby's article, there is an implied reference to Geoff Whitty's playful (yet serious) jibe to Young that he seems to be adopting a position similar to that of the former Conservative secretary for education Michael Gove. In order to understand why this is not the case, we need to return to a third, connecting book that Young published in the late 1990s.

It is no criticism of Young to say that, in the late 1980s and for some of the 1990s, his work gained less critical attention. There are doubtless many factors for this, which relate to Young's own institutional position at the Institute of Education, his relationship with Bernstein, as well as personal decisions, all set within the context of a prolonged period of defeat for the left. This helps to explain the relative neglect of a third text that connects *Knowledge and Control* with Young's latest work. Indeed, Young's colleague Ken Spours (2017) has recently suggested that *The Curriculum of the Future* – published in 1998 in the new dawn of a Labour government – should be seen as representing Young's 'Grundisse moment' – that is, he views it in terms of the discovery of an important but neglected text from the past.

The Curriculum of the Future grew out of Young's engagement, in the early 1990s, with the work of a loose coalition of 'left modernisers' who were exploring the implications of the economic changes associated with the shift of advanced western economies such as Britain to post-Fordism. Mass schooling, they argued, had been established in the context of the growth of urban-industrial societies, and had taken its organisational forms and dominant methods from the ideal-type of the factory system. The result was an assembly-line mentality, with alienating forms of labour and high rates of drop-out. The shift to a more complex economic system, organised around batch production and team circles, and requiring higher levels of flexibility, engagement and reflexivity on the part of workers, would also require more highly skilled forms of education. Thus, Phil Brown and Hugh Lauder's (1992) edited collection *Education for Economic Survival?* took the view that the advent of 'post-Fordism' or 'flexible specialisation' had the potential to usher in new forms of labour requirements and practices and that this could open the space for radical changes in the nature of schooling. According to these 'left modernisers', there now existed the possibility of a genuine 'correspondence' between the needs of industry and the organisation of schooling. The fragmented, subject-based curriculum that seemed distant from the concerns and interests of young people and which ensured that many left early or dropped out could be redesigned so as to allow for the development of 'collective intelligence'.

Young developed these themes in *The Curriculum of the Future*, which was published at a moment of relative optimism on the 'left' that Britain would find a way to overcome its long-term failure to modernise, and would dissolve some of its deep-rooted class and regional divisions. Whereas mass production had

led to what Young called 'divisive specialisation', mirrored in a curriculum divided between 'academic' and 'vocational' routes, and characterised by highly segregated subject specialisms, the embryonic economic 'new times' held the prospect of 'connective specialisation' which 'refers explicitly to the interdependence of different specialists and contrasts with the insularity of traditional subject specialists'. At the same time, it should be noted that Young had had enough experience of the disappointment of successive failed modernisations by Labour governments to be sanguine about the prospects of change:

> if the UK is to have an economy based on flexible specialisation it has to develop a curriculum that is designed for that future. In the UK, despite the result of the general election in May 1997, this future still looks very distant. (Young, 1998, p. 79)

From the Curriculum of the Future to Socialist Realism

It was, in part, disillusionment with the subsequent development of New Labour's educational project that led Michael to develop his work on social realism. This explains the following comment of his, as quoted in the *Guardian* article:

> We've always used vocational courses as a way of coping with low achievers and that seems to me a loser from the beginning. And I am not a fan of people who go on about creativity. Creativity doesn't spring from nowhere, it comes out of something you've been thinking about. (Wilby, 2018)

In Spours' view, Young abandoned the work started in *The Curriculum of the Future* as 'policy-oriented optimism' gave way to a pessimism that eventually emerged as 'socialist realism'. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere (Morgan, 2014), the final chapter of *The Curriculum of the Future* gives some hints as to how Young's work would subsequently develop, as he reflects upon an article published in 1996 by Rob Moore (Moore, 1996) which questions the whole assumption that educational change can be explained by educational factors. This brings Young closer to the position famously adopted by Bernstein in 1969, that 'education cannot compensate for society'.

From this perspective, then, we can see that, contrary to Wilby's view, Young's apparent volte-face has more to do with the way that the political ground shifted to the centre-right (taking with it many educators) than with Young's own position. Indeed, it is the continued focus on knowledge that makes Young's position potentially 'radical', while making the left's continued neglect of curriculum 'conservative'. Surely it is a focus on knowledge – as part of the critique in educational institutions of what Robin Blackburn (1969) many years ago called bourgeois ideology – that is needed now.

To Be Concluded…

It is important to recognise that Young's career has been conducted during a period in which the educational left has been on the defensive and the possibilities for a truly socialist education have not been realised. This is not to say that Young's position is immune to critique. Young himself has been open to persuasion and to argument, and thus models the kind of 'radical doubt' that we might expect education to provide. As Sharp (1981) argued:

> Young's sociology of education is self-consciously moral and political. Its social roots are to be traced to the late 1960s, in Britain's growing economic, social and political problems, illustrated at both the political level by the crisis in social democracy and within theory by the growing criticism of a reformist approach to educational issues represented by Fabianism. (p. 76)

As the rise and fall of Thatcherism, New Labour's failed modernisation, the global financial crisis and Brexit all too plainly show, the political problems that gave rise to Young's agenda have not been successfully resolved (see Jessop, 2017 for an account that stresses the continuities of Britain's conjunctural crises; and Morgan, 2018 for an attempt to relate these to schooling). Sharp's criticism of Young's work still resonates: the problem is that he has never been able to state clearly *what* the contents of the curriculum might be. Surely, she argues, socialists should be able to indicate what such a curriculum would look like (a point similarly made by Young's colleague Geoff Whitty in a 1983 essay entitled 'Missing: a policy on the curriculum'). It is perhaps unfair to take Young to task for this as he embarks on his 85th year; however, his extensive oeuvre of writing provides a rich resource for those who seek to advance the project of socialist education. Indeed, Young's latest phase of work – signalled by the publication of *Knowledge and the Future School* (Young & Lambert, 2014) – has parallels with the aforementioned *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge* (Whitty & Young, 1976) in its attempts to apply theoretical insights from the sociology of education to the practicalities of curriculum development in schools. It is this, I would suggest, that means that Young's work appears to attract controversy.

And this is one of the (many) things that we can learn from Michael Young's work – that it focuses us on the need to think about both knowledge *and* capitalism. Here it is useful to return to some earlier arguments within the sociology of education which have largely been forgotten on the left. I am thinking here of Harold Entwhistle's work (1978, 1979) which argued strongly that working-class children should have access to the elite knowledge of the dominant (i.e. hegemonic) culture, and that the educational left, in its embrace of Gramsci, is strangely quiet about the fact that his progressive politics was based on a conservative view of knowledge. Entwhistle concluded, in an early rendition of Young's current position, that:

> it is not clear that educationalists perform any service to underprivileged children by pretending that social amelioration can derive from anything other than the acquisition of knowledge of institutions, ideas and ways of life which transcend their immediate physical and cultural environment. (Entwhistle, 1978, p. 185)

At around the same time, Reynolds and Sullivan (1980) argued the case for a 'socialist sociology of education' which rejects the relativism of the new directions approach. They argued that the transition from capitalism to socialism is dependent on 'the universalisation of access to a national education system' which would maintain much of the curriculum content presently associated with capitalist schooling. Reynolds and Sullivan rejected the notion that school subjects are 'cultural artefacts of the bourgeois class' (or, in Young's terms, 'knowledge of the powerful') and that the 'rational empiricism' of the curriculum as well as much of what the left rejected as 'bourgeois culture' is the best means to advancing working-class interests in education. (As an aside, Reynolds' subsequent abandonment of the sociology of education in search of the 'sunlit uplands' of school effectiveness research is ripe for analysis.) While there is much debate as to what the best form of knowledge required to advance the socialist transformation of education might be (think, for instance, of the different versions of curriculum implied by 'Blue Labour' as opposed to the 'left modernisers' associated with accelerationism), it is surely important to acknowledge that there is no necessary reason why the integration of school subjects through issue-based approaches is inherently 'radical' (and why the knowledge contained within such courses may be 'low-level') or why, if taught well, the 'traditional' subjects should not be a basis for a rigorous analysis that locates concepts and ideas within the framework of capitalist society. The important thing from a socialist perspective is the extent to which the curriculum is based on a materialist or realist analysis of society. This requires a 'socialist realism' that accepts that there do exist better understandings of what David Harvey (2015) calls 'the ways the world works'. The trouble at the moment is that many so-called radical educators are too concerned with the processes of how to teach than with the question of what knowledge is of most worth. But, as Robert Tressell showed so clearly in his classic socialist text *The Ragged-trousered Philanthropists*, socialist knowledge is required to counter the distortions of capitalist economic ideology and religious dogma. Young's work, if read properly, serves to focus on that the historical project of socialist transformation.

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