

# Epilogue: Education beyond Retromodernism, and Towards Really Useful Workers' Knowledge

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The late Basil Bernstein once said, though I cannot remember where, even though over the years I have heard it many times, that: 'education cannot compensate for society'. Furthermore, as Singer and Pezone (2003) point out, in 1897 the classical French sociologist Emile Durkheim 'rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society' (p.1). However, this Special Issue was produced on the basis that whilst education on its own could not transform society it nevertheless would be a vital ingredient in any project for progressive social change. This is certainly the case in contemporary Cuba where education is playing a key role in the country's socialist project (see Ridenour, 2006). As Dr Luis Gomez, Minister of Education for Cuba explained at the World Conference on Basic Literacy Training, held in Havana in February 2005:

The idea is to reach everybody, that no-one is ever abandoned or unattended. Education reaches everyone from early childhood and throughout life, excluding no-one. We pin our hopes on this utopia and the results we have obtained breathe life into our optimism. We are building the fairest, most equal society that has ever been known to the history of humankind (Ridenhour, 2006).

To write off education as a crucial factor in a project for social transformation is, on the Cuban experience, not just short-sighted and pessimistic but practically naïve.

The same point is made by Keith Flett (2006) who argues for a reconsideration of an idea first advanced by historian Richard Johnson 30 years ago: that education should provide 'really useful workers' knowledge'. Flett points out that New Labour started off by raising some useful questions (e.g. about working class educational failure) but came up with answers that ceded ever more control of education to business interests. In the terms I described this phenomenon in the *Editorial*, New Labour invariably came up with retro-modern solutions. Flett argues for the need to ditch New Labour's retromodernism and build on the work of Johnson. Really useful workers' knowledge includes 'spearhead knowledge': which is 'everything from the labour theory of value to the need for a radical working class press' (Ibid.). Furthermore, Flett argues that although structures are important, a project for radical social and educational change requires a curriculum that opens up young and adult minds to these issues.

Thus, in various ways, we need to go beyond retromodernist educational policies, practices and processes. In an article I wrote a couple of years ago (Rikowski, 2004), I attempted a much fuller and more historical account of education for progressive social change (i.e. socialism) than that presented in my article for this Special Edition. However, that 2004 article lacked a cutting edge. Looking back, it did not provide the killer argument regarding why education should be a *necessary* aspect of any serious socialist politics. What I was concerned with above all here was to try to convince that in a politics of social transformation, despite what Bernstein and Durkheim have said, education has a vital role to play. In their various ways, all the articles, dialogues and interviews in this Special Issue consolidate or expand or touch on this view.

## References

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