

# A Cuckoo in the Nest? Powerful Knowledge in English History Education Discourse

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## Abstract

'Social Realism' has long underpinned the dominant discourse in history education in England (Smith, 2017). Its commitment to 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge has enabled history educators to assert the unique contribution that their subject makes to a child's education and fomented an apparent consensus about the aims and purposes of a history education.

In this paper, we argue that it is increasingly a consensus under strain. While the terms 'powerful knowledge' and 'social realism' are widely used by history educators, their overuse as rhetorical devices has weakened their precision and undermined some of their theoretical potency. We suggest that this has given rise to a split within social realist history educators between 'Radical' and 'Traditional' social realists. Both use the language of social realism and both subscribe to the theory's epistemic underpinning, but disagree about the nature and significance of powerful knowledge.

These are wide-ranging context models which we intend to develop in more detail elsewhere. We here restrict our analysis to the theorisation of powerful knowledge in each.

Keywords: Historical knowledge, Powerful knowledge, Social Realism

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Following on from the ferocious arguments about the relative merits of "subject knowledge" and "skills" in the 1980s (Phillips, 1998), the National Curriculum created a consensus in History teaching which held until the last two years. This consensus about the nature and purpose of a good historical education was reflected in the 2007 National Curriculum. NC 2007 was a conceptually-focused curriculum which expected children to develop their knowledge of disciplinary concepts (such as change, causation and evidence) and substantive concepts

such as (empire, migration, ideas and beliefs). While Yates and Young (2010) complained of ‘evacuation of content’ in the curriculum, this accusation could not be fairly at levelled History. As Fordham (2013b) pointed out, what the 2007 curriculum lacked was not content, but the specification of content. By framing knowledge around conceptual understanding in this way, (instead of listing events to be studied) the history curriculum, at least, perhaps prefigured many of the arguments later made by social realists.

As has been argued elsewhere (Smith, 2017), this unity was particularly useful in periods of curriculum contestation during which the history teaching community was able to use a disciplinary defence of its subject to resist unwelcome curriculum change. This unity has, however, fractured somewhat in recently and, ironically, it has been the arguments of some social realists (a position which many history educators continue to espouse) which has permitted this split. Although most history educators subscribe nominally to a disciplinary understanding of the subject, there has been considerable divergence on the question of what constitutes ‘powerful knowledge’ in a Bernsteinian (Bernstein, 1999) horizontal discourse like history.

Like Beck (2013) we do not agree with dismissive references to ‘powerful knowledge’ as a ‘sexy-sounding phrase’, we do argue that – in history education at least – it has become a magic mirror which reflects whatever the viewer wishes to see. Based on their interpretation of powerful knowledge, we theorise two distinct fields/positions which differ over the definitions of both of the words. We term these: Radical Social Realism (RSR) and Traditional Social Realism (TSR) (for a more detailed comparison see Figure 3 in Appendix A).

**Figure 1.**

	<b>Powerful</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>
<b>Traditional Social Realism</b>	Permits social mobility	Unproblematic ‘Core’ of substantive knowledge
<b>Radical Social Realism</b>	Permits challenges to social relations	Disciplinary meta-knowledge

To the radical social realist, historical education is powerful if it orientates children in time and asks them to consider the way in which the discipline of history works – how accounts are constructed and how they might be interrogated. Lee (2011) refers to this simply as ‘historical literacy’. Traditional social realists whilst agreeing with aspects of this position, also espouse the ‘power’ of certain core knowledge which, they argue builds understanding of historical concepts (e.g. peasant, parliament etc.). The most recent writing from Traditional Social Realists, most notably Counsell and Fordham, has sought to marry the work of Young and E.D. Hirsch. Which leads to the prioritising of certain pieces of knowledge as being inherently more significant. This is in contrast to the more mainstream Social Realist position that important knowledge emerges through disciplinary discussions and is therefore transitive. Although Young (Young, et al., 2014; Young, 2011) explicitly repudiates any similarity between their ‘future three’ curriculum and the neo-traditionalism of Hirsch, the Traditional Social Realists see no such tension.

The remainder of this paper will develop these two models with reference to published work on the history curriculum and interpret them in relation to the writings of Michael Young.

### **Michael Young and (Powerful) Knowledge**

Put simply, social realism accepts that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore transitive, but that knowledge is of something intransitive that is both independent of the knower and unchanged by knowledge; this reality of that knowledge transcends the circumstances of its production. This position, therefore, rejects both naive realism, which disregards the social construction of knowledge, and a relativist position which denies the possibility of judging between competing truth claims. The role of a school curriculum in this conception is to equip children with the theoretical knowledge to 'transcend particular contexts so that it can be used to think the unthinkable and the not-yet-thought' (Wheelahan, 2010, p. 13).

To Social Realists, this necessitates a curriculum built around disciplinary knowledge which, although socially constructed, offers the best training for thinking in this way. Young labels this powerful knowledge and writes,

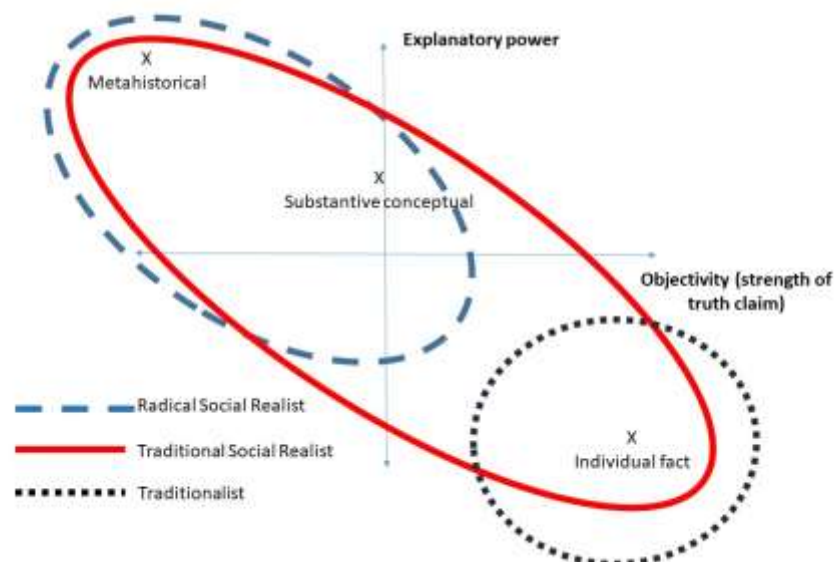
[Powerful Knowledge] refers to what the knowledge can do or what intellectual power it gives those who have access to it. Powerful knowledge provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world and acquiring it can provide learners with a language for engaging in political moral and other kinds of debates'. (Young, 2008b, p. 14)

Young also offers the helpful distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of powerful. The latter refers to knowledge that has cultural capital solely because it is possessed by the powerful. However, the mistake of early sociologists of education was to assume that its possession by the powerful was the sole determinant of the importance of knowledge. As Young (2008b, p. 14) writes, 'characterising knowledge as high status tells us nothing about knowledge itself.'

At this juncture, there is a need to define more closely what is meant by 'knowledge' in history. There are, we suggest, three forms of knowledge. The first is the metahistorical – the understanding of how the discipline of history works, how historical knowledge is constructed. The second is the substantive-conceptual – an understanding of concepts such as migration, power and other concepts that are central to thinking like an historian. The third is at the level of individual facts or truth claims. In the diagram below (Figure 2), these three types of knowledge are plotted on a chart which compares them in terms of explanatory power. The dashed line shows what Radical Social Realists believe frame the curriculum, while the position of Traditional Social Realists is shown with a solid circle. It should be stressed that TSRs do not see the metahistorical as unimportant and nor do RSRs see facts as unimportant – the issue is whether these should frame the curriculum. The Radical Social Realists emphasise the explanatory power of History, whilst Traditional Social Realists emphasise the need to build on learnt discrete knowledge statements. Whilst some out and out traditionalists consider History to be simply a body of knowledge, with no role for concepts or understanding. The

position of thoroughgoing traditionalists – for whom disciplinary knowledge is unimportant – is also marked for comparison's sake.

Figure 2



### Radical Social Realism

Although it did not bear the name, we would argue that a kind of social realist thinking has long underpinned history education discourse in England. Perhaps the most important thinker in shaping this way of thinking has been Peter Lee. As long ago as 1991, he prefigured many of the Social Realist arguments about children acquiring disciplinary knowledge and the primacy of the theoretical over the everyday,

'The ability to recall accounts without any understanding of the problems involved in constructing them or the criteria involved in evaluating them has nothing historical about it. Without an understanding of what makes an account historical, there is nothing to distinguish such an ability from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths or poems' (Lee, 1991, pp. 48-49)

This position is remarkably similar to Wheelahan's social realist view that '[students] need access to 'disciplinarily' or disciplinary styles of reasoning so that they understand how knowledge is used and the broad criteria that need to be applied in evaluating the validity of arguments' (2010, p. 2). For Lee, a historical education has to be rooted in the theoretical. It could not be reduced to learning the shared cultural markers offered by an 'everyday' understanding of the past whether elite cultural canon or the unifying myths of a street gang.

In much the same way, Lee foreshadowed social realist arguments about the transformative power of historical understanding

"History changes our whole view of the world, of what the present is and of what human beings are and might be... The reason for teaching history is not that it changes society, but that it changes pupils; it changes what they see in the world, and how they see it" (Lee, 1991, pp. 42-43)

In emphasising a disciplinary approach to the subject grounded on the 'intrinsic' value of history, Lee (1991, p. 42) opposed all extrinsic motivations for teaching the past whether it be the 'good citizens' of the progressive left (White, 1992) or 'confident patriots' of the right (Baker, 1989). Lee (2011) later refined his arguments about the purpose of history and coined the term 'historical literacy' to encapsulate his view of why a rigorous historical education was a necessary entitlement of all students. This was to be an education which oriented children in time and bestowed a theoretical and disciplinary understanding of how and why historians were able to make claims about the past. Such a view accords with Wheelahan (2010, p. 2) that 'disciplinary knowledge constitutes the means society uses to transcend the limits of individual experience... all societies need to connect... the thinkable and the unthinkable, the here and the not here... The capacity to do so is a precondition for the existence of society'.

Although Lee's work is the foundation of what we term 'Radical Social Realism' in the discipline of History, it is important to note that we do not mean the word 'Radical' in an overtly political sense, but rather in its more literal sense of facilitating change. 'Radical' social realists do not propose an activist curriculum or especially favour the teaching of hidden or marginalised histories. However, they do oppose any conception of canonical knowledge, 'core knowledge' that is in some way more important to know than other, non-canonical knowledge. They hold this argument not from a political perspective as earlier sociologists of knowledge did (Young, 1971), but from an ontological one. The concept of lists of approved knowledge or consensus narratives is rejected not because of political bias, but because of the ontological arrogance that any list necessarily implies. Any knowledge claim, and by implication any historical canon is inherently transitive. The list may change as new evidence is revealed, new questions asked or new groups become 'worthy' of entering the canon. The *past*, as opposed to history, is, however, intransitive: events happened whether we know about them or not, whether they are part of the canon or not. Furthermore, our knowledge does not change these events in any way. Our knowledge will always be partial, so the question 'whose knowledge is of the most worth?' remains in a modified and restricted form. It is not the discipline of history which is repressive, but rather a common-sense view that certain items of knowledge are inherently more powerful than others. This is not to argue that all knowledge is equally powerful, like Young

we acknowledge that knowledge is created and tested by disciplinary processes and this process has the potential to produce knowledge nearer to the truth and as such has the potential to become knowledge that is powerful.

Young (2008a) argued that progressives were naturally attracted to the transgression of subject boundaries, but Lee's position seems to defy this, as does Bhaskar's (2010) vigorous defence of disciplines in his conception of interdisciplinarity as a means to understand climate change.

For radical social realists, it is the contextual contingency of substantive knowledge which makes it a poor basis for a school curriculum. As Young (2008a, pp. 88-89) points out, 'knowledge is socially produced by communities of knowledge producers and... these communities are characterised by struggles around power and competing interests'. Consequently, a curriculum framed around concepts is important, but the emphasis should be on those second-order (change/ causation) and metahistorical (evidence/ accounts) concepts which shape the discipline, not on concepts presumed to emerge organically from a canon of core knowledge.

Until very recently, there was considerable agreement about the value of a social realist approach among history educators. In 2011, Counsell wrote *'Disciplinary Knowledge for all'* which celebrated the influence of Young's ideas on history teaching. In the same year, Harris and Burn (Harris & Burn, 2011) used arguments from social realism to attack 'ill-disciplined' thinking in New Labour education policy. Similar arguments have been made in countries across the world e.g. South Africa (Bertram, 2009), Scotland (Smith, 2016) and New Zealand (Ormond, 2016).

### **The emergence of Traditional Social Realism**

In 2013, the announcement of a history curriculum based around core knowledge in England was almost universally opposed by history educators (Smith, 2017). However, from 2015 onwards, a number of influential writers on the history curriculum (associated originally with the Cambridge History PGCE) began to change their position markedly. Both Michael Fordham (2012) and Christine Counsell (2011) had previously written approvingly of the theoretical contribution made by social realism, however, recently, (Counsell, 2017; Fordham, 2016) this has combined with an enthusiasm for the traditionalism of E. D. Hirsch. We term this position Traditional Social Realism. Unlike thoroughgoing traditionalists who see core knowledge alone as the essence of the subject, Traditional Social Realists see core knowledge and disciplinary knowledge as mutually reinforcing. We suggest that such a framing blurs Young's sharp and helpful distinction between powerful knowledge and the knowledge of the powerful. By looking at two examples of TSR thought, it is possible to see the tensions that such a position creates.

Fordham has made a series of comments that show his commitment to the teaching of knowledge. In 2013 in his review of Christodoulou's book *'Seven Myths about Education'* (Fordham, 2013b), he praises her for having similar ideas to the Cambridge PGCE course and placing knowledge at the heart of History teaching, saying she could add to "the growing literature we have in the history education community on how pupils' historical knowledge can be improved." He emphasised the importance of knowledge in his 2015 blog *"Is understanding a thing?"* where he juxtaposed his understanding of medieval kingship with that of a Year 7 pupil

(age 12) and with that of Professor Rosamond McKitterick. He collapses all discussion of understanding into knowledge, with the comment that Prof McKitterick "...knows a great deal more..." and arguing that we cannot tell where knowing becomes understanding. For Fordham, understanding is simply a product of the accumulation of examples, and the more examples one acquires the better one's understanding.

However, Fordham's approach never addresses the questions of 'which examples?' or 'whose examples?'. It is possible to acquire many examples and still possess a partial or distorted picture. 'Understanding' must surely refer to the strength of one's grasp on the concept, the ability to construct an explanation of it and the ability to judge the quality of others' explanations. We do this on the grounds of plausibility, coherence, the neatness of the explanation as well as its relevance and applicability. He postulates understanding, as the old Empiricists did, as a point to be reached when things are known rather than a space in which learning takes place. He ends his discussion, on his website, with a hearkening back to a putative Golden age of Teaching with the claim

"We have been conditioned in the field of education to be afraid of the word 'knowledge' and, perhaps because of this, to dress it up as something else. It's about time that we stripped away these confusions and got back to the thing at the heart of teaching: knowledge." (Fordham, 2015)

Counsell (2017) takes an even more uncompromising line on knowledge. This chapter makes three arguments which depart significantly from her earlier work and which lean heavily on ED Hirsch and psychologist Daniel Willingham for their inspiration. First, she argues, following Hirsch, that it is only substantive knowledge based on exposure to multiple prototypes of an abstract concept which permits abstract thinking. Second, she implies that the explicit teaching of second-order (disciplinary) concepts is a poor substitute for the teaching of substantive knowledge. Third, she argues that curriculum planners should 'make certain items non-negotiable for memorisation... in England, as least, systematic attention to recall is rare in... non-examination classes' (Counsell, 2017, p88). Using an example of the English Civil War, she cites several items of 'non-negotiable knowledge' including 'Charles I, Archbishop Laud, the Bishops War and the Irish Rebellion'. By itemising knowledge in this way, one wonders what the criteria are for selection or exclusion. Could it be that certain knowledge makes the cut because it is the knowledge of the powerful?

Young argues that 'Intellectual development is concept-based not a content-based or skill-based process' (Young, 2010, p. 25). While all social realists would agree, Counsell's position raises the question of what is the 'proper' level of concepts around which to base a curriculum. For the Radical Social Realists, metaconcepts both procedural (change, evidence) and substantive (migration, war) are appropriate – Traditional Social Realists agree, but argue that meaningful 'progress' in understanding these concepts can only be achieved by a close focus on the exemplification (prototypes) of these concepts.

It is not always clear, though, which concepts are being exemplified. Concepts are necessarily nested – each apparent particular is a specific example of something larger. Is war a concept? Is Civil War? Is the English Civil War? Is the Bishops War? Each of these is colligation (the term given by Walsh (1958) to a group of related events) and each is conceptual in a way that Archbishop Laud is not. A continual focus on specific examples need not necessarily lead the students into

an understanding of the abstract, scientific, concept. In fact, it is an error to assume that growing substantive knowledge leads directly to better conceptual understanding.

Fordham and Counsell's position can be contrasted with that of the Radical Social Realists. For example, Shemilt (2009) argues for a concept-first curriculum in which children '...should also be taught how to form and test generalizations, and to use second-order concepts as organizational principles as well as analytical tools' (p190). For RSRs, it is these kinds of concepts that Young is promoting in his view of curriculum. Limon goes even further to argue that "...students' understanding of historical content is often filtered by their history meta-concepts and epistemological beliefs about history and its learning" (Limon, 2002, pp. 276-277).

These concepts are scientific concepts; they need to be taught as they do not emerge from everyday experience. For RSRs, substantive knowledge does not precede conceptual or epistemological understanding.

Young's own position in relation to this is difficult to ascertain. In 2010, he addresses common misconceptions of social realism by exemplifying the kinds of concepts that might frame the curriculum,

'As a former Chemistry teacher and lecturer in sociology, I have some idea of chemistry's concepts, like periodicity and valency, and those of sociology, like solidarity and social class.' (Young, 2010, p27)

He has probably deliberately chosen one example from a Bernsteinian vertical discourse (Chemistry) and one from a horizontal discourse (social science). However, an important difference between these two is apparently overlooked. In vertical discourses the conceptual precedes the particular. The concept (such as valency) is identifiable and the valency of a particular ion can be identified. Indeed, it was the strength of this concept that allowed Mendeleev to propose the existence of as yet undiscovered elements. Concepts in horizontal discourse have no such predictive power since they are merely colligations assembled by the historian. In these cases, the conceptual follows the specific – concepts are, in a sense created by the examples which exemplify them. To take a somewhat clichéd example, are the Irish troubles an example of the concept of terrorism or the concept of war? To the Radical Social Realist, a conceptual curriculum does not escape the problem of whose knowledge, or rather whose examples, we should use.

What Michael Young might make of Traditional Social Realism is difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, he has repeatedly distanced himself from a Hirschean curriculum. He dismisses the neo-traditionalism of former Education Minister Michael Gove as 'trapped in its own elitist past' and claims that, 'With its 'given' concept of subject knowledge, Future1 began to lose credibility of the Second World War because it was unable to respond ... to the new knowledge that was being produced' (2011, p. 267). Similarly, in *Knowledge and the Future School he attacks* 'The traditional model [which] treats knowledge as given and as something that students have to comply with' (2010, p22).

However, in his 2016 chapter of *Masterclass in History Education*, Young came closest to endorsing a Traditional Social Realist view of history education when he endorsed Fordham's chapter in the same book (Young, 2016) claiming that the



work of Fordham and others "...are ahead of anything that curriculum theorists are suggesting" (Young, 2016, p. 185). However, as we have discussed above, Fordham's approach amounts largely to the accumulation of examples, which he sees as enriching and problematising conceptual understanding. Our view is that more examples can enrich conceptual understanding, but there is no reason it necessarily should be so. The accumulation of more and more one-sided examples merely creates more certainty that one's world view is correct. We are a long way from the transformative power of a historical education espoused by Lee (Lee, 2011).

### **Conclusion: Social Justice or Social Mobility?**

In her introduction to *'Why knowledge matters in curriculum'* Leesa Wheelahan (2010) makes an impassioned plea for the link between curriculum knowledge and social mobility, arguing that vocational education that does not take students beyond their everyday experience forces the students into lower paid low status jobs. It is, of course, overwhelmingly the case that senior positions in society are occupied disproportionately by those who attended private and selective schools and this is, in anyone's eyes, an unfairness. Indeed, this argument from social immobility has been used by traditionalists to justify their core knowledge curricula.

The extent to which 'knowledge' can itself be a decisive factor in changing this is clearly up for debate. Social Realists of all stripes believe that knowledge can bring about change – that knowledge does have inherent power as it gives access to "...society's conversation about what it should be like." (Weelahan 2010 p.9). Where traditional and radical social realists differ is over the nature of that knowledge and the nature of that change.

To traditional social realists, the test of a school curriculum is the extent to which children from ordinary schools compete with those from more selective or prestigious establishments, social mobility expressed as academic success. The key to this is clearly cultural literacy – the disadvantaged should speak the language of the powerful. To a radical social realist, this undermines the transformative power of powerful knowledge as these knowledge claims are asserted to be more powerful without being tested within the disciplines.

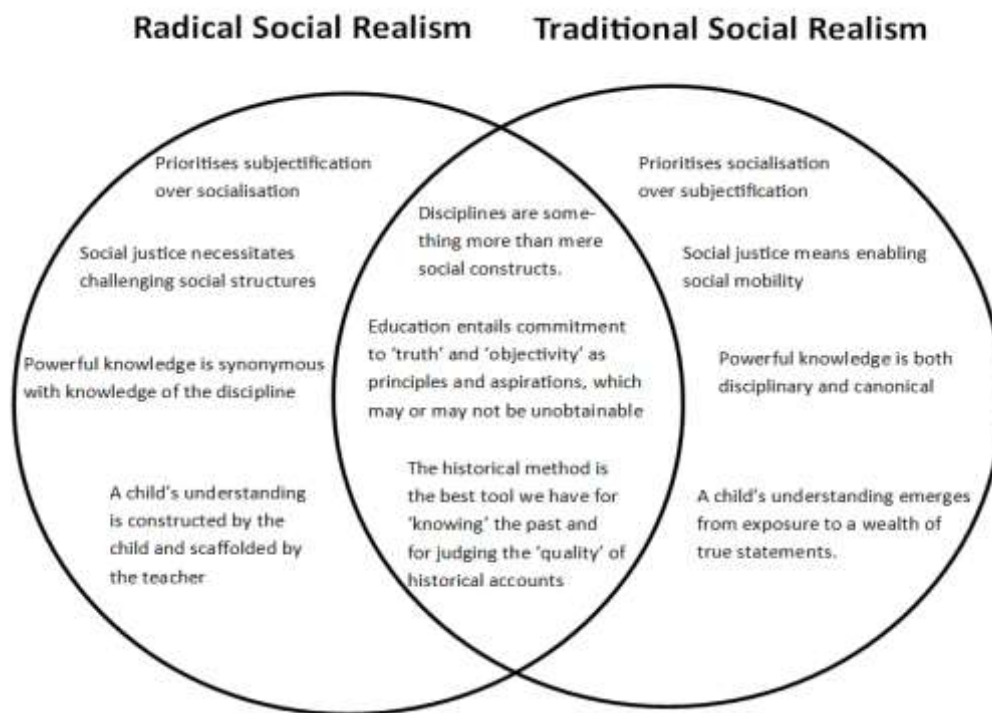
Knowledge can transform lives, but it does this neither through tradition nor the accumulation of knowledge fragments such as 'Archbishop Laud'. Instead, lives are transformed by the epistemic insight that a rigorous history curriculum confers. The central knowledge question for children is not 'what do I need to know', but rather 'how do we come to know what we think we know?' It is the latter question that allows children to take part in society's conversation about itself. It is the latter question which confers the ability to challenge and question. It is the latter question which truly represents powerful knowledge.

NB.

This paper is an extract from a longer essay which develops these two positions in more detail. While this article focuses solely on knowledge in the curriculum, the

longer piece will take in questions about purpose and pedagogy in greater detail. The Venn diagram below gives an insight into how these models might be extended into these domains.

**Figure 3.**



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