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*Workers' Education in the Global South: radical adult
education at the crossroads* by Linda Cooper (review)

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Review

Linda Cooper (2020) *Workers' Education in the Global South: radical adult education at the crossroads*. Leiden: Brill; Boston: Sense.

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Workers' Education in the Global South: radical adult education at the crossroads is a remarkable intervention – both in contemporary educational debates and as an approach to understanding the early strengths and later failures of the formalisation of worker education in post-apartheid South Africa. Cooper provides a lucid analysis and a carefully argued and insightful account of the nature of and changes in worker education over the last 50 years in South Africa. Her definition of worker education is wide-ranging, including both more formal worker education projects as well as its occurrences in everyday organisational practice. She draws amongst others on research conducted with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and Urban Training Project (UTP) in the 1980s, the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) in the 2000s and the Natal Workers College in the 2010s.

The book provides a sustained critique of one of the most influential approaches to develop within South African sociology of education over the last two decades. Central to this approach, built around the work of Basil Bernstein, has firstly been the notion of the importance of 'powerful knowledge'; and, secondly, distinctions between various kinds of knowledge, such as between abstract and everyday knowledge, conceptual and relevant knowledge, high and low status knowledge, formal and informal knowledge, codified and experiential knowledge, systematised and commonsense knowledge. In this view, 'powerful knowledge' is formal, abstract and conceptual 'school knowledge' rather than everyday and experiential, informal knowledge. Cooper draws from a wealth of conceptual and historical resources to rescue worker education traditions from the condescension of

this school of thought that has, whether consciously or unconsciously, positioned the knowledge within worker education traditions as everyday/low status/informal/experiential and commonsense. Key to this is her emphasis on the complex and dynamic nature of knowledge rather than its static, classifiable and categorisable characteristics as well as her instructive analysis of specific instances of worker education. She lightly frames her discussion of knowledge within the Vygotsky-inspired Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which also provides room for use of a wide range of theorists, from Gramsci to Bakhtin, to develop her argument that knowledge use and formation within worker education cannot be read in terms of the binary oppositions articulated within Bernsteinian approaches.

Cooper's point of departure is that worker education, and the knowledge used and developed within it, was distinctive in its social and ideological purposes. These purposes determined what counted as 'useful knowledge'. Although there was constant contestation, over whether these purposes should be more instrumentalist and reformist or more radical and transformative, in practice, they were most often a combination of 'resistance, transformative vision and pragmatic accommodation' (37). These ideological purposes also defined the epistemology, type of knowledge and pedagogies developed within worker education. In contrast to the dismissive Bernsteinian perspective, Cooper shows how, far from being merely 'common-sense' and experiential, worker education constantly combined theoretical, and experiential forms of knowledge, transforming 'common sense' into 'good sense'. She reveals how the break-down of binaries, such as between mental and manual labour and theory and practice, has lain at the heart of knowledge formation within radical worker education traditions and shows how these played out within her key, selected 'moments' of the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. 'The nature of knowledge that is recruited', she writes, 'is so complexly layered and hybridized that it is not fruitful to conceptualise this knowledge in dualist terms' (75). She finds 'a process of successive layering of different forms of knowledge – conceptual, contextual and experiential – in a series of dialectical movements, to form complex constellations of knowledge' (89). She explores how these processes and different kinds of knowledge use were manifested in formal training as well as in different educational sites – such as workshops, everyday organisational activity and in mass action.

An important dimension of Cooper's work is that she does not romanticise her subject. She highlights, for example, the contradictions between more directive and participatory pedagogical traditions, the former drawing

from Leninist and the latter from Freirian approaches. She teases out differences, tensions and contradictions and makes her own critical views clear, while maintaining a sense of the ambiguities of each position. So for example in her discussion of the contradiction between the impulse towards didacticism and a more participatory pedagogy where political imperatives dictated didactic approaches, while democratic goals determined the use of participatory pedagogies. She uses Bernstein's notion of 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies to refer to the overt, teacher-directed and didactic pedagogies on the one hand and to the more participatory, learner-centered variety of pedagogies on the other. 'Invisible' pedagogies are so-called because they disguise the power relations inherent in the teaching-learning relationship and give the appearance of worker/learner control, whereas these power relations are explicit in 'visible' pedagogies. Even as she uses the dichotomy, however, she argues and shows that both types of pedagogy have been part of worker education traditions, sometimes even within the same organisation and course. Whatever the pedagogy within these forms of worker education, whether didactic or facilitative, Cooper underlines that fact that they assisted in constructing what was 'essentially a class-based, identity-building, ideological project' (110).

Refreshing about the book is the attention it pays to the role of culture in these traditions. This again is evidence of the range of knowledge-making activities at work in worker education: 'this rich performative culture drawn upon in the union context does not simply signal the use of "local", "particular" knowledge' (130). It 'creates affordances' for 'an expansive learning environment' where more 'dialogical, multi-voiced communication between workers or shop-steward delegates can take place with workers playing educative roles for one another' (130). It also provides a 'powerful resource for the development of working class identity and the expansion of the labour movements' ideological influence' (131). Plays, poetry, songs and choirs built solidarity through stirring up 'age-old symbols of resistance' (133). Mass action, too, as the 2002 SAMWU strike in Cape Town illustrates, can be seen as a site for creative learning and knowledge-making activity as well as celebration of collective identity.

Cooper's book demonstrates with great clarity and immense subtlety the quality and depth of the learning and knowledge-building activities that occurred in the context of South Africa's informal radical worker education history against approaches that implicitly relegate the knowledge within worker education traditions to second-class status. It also poses the critical

question of why these traditions collapsed in the post-apartheid period and why the education and training initiatives in which the union movement was centrally involved in the transition to democracy have failed. She answers it with reference to the weakening of the labour movement and worker education during South Africa's transition occasioned by deeper structural changes within the world economy and South Africa, the adoption of the two-stage theory of revolution resulting in GEAR, and by the shift away from worker education and towards a more accommodationist strategy of workplace training.

She shows that the institutionalisation, formalisation and professionalisation of workplace training through the National Qualifications Framework has had little impact on workers and that those responsible for it in the workplace have had little understanding of how it was supposed to work. What went wrong? Building on work by Allais, Vally and others, Cooper argues that the NQF trapped worker education within a neo-liberal human capital framework that subordinated the needs of labour to those of capital. She adds to this literature by showing that although the labour movement adopted the NQF model from labour movements in Australia and New Zealand, there were then already critical voices both locally and internationally that were muted and ignored. She also shows how its adoption led to resources being moved upwards towards leadership levels, how unions developed a reliance on outsiders with specialised expertise and how worker education was generally narrowed and depoliticised. The current approach to worker education has, she argues and shows, had profoundly negative effects. Hope, she argues, will come from recognising the changes in the world of work and workers, and the new organisations that have sprung up to meet their organisational and educational needs. These are reclaiming a radical tradition that binds organisation and education to transformative social purposes.

It is difficult to do justice to this book. Cooper has done South African educational scholarship and radical education more generally a tremendous service in writing it. It presents a singular challenge to dominant approaches to knowledge in South African educational research, provides an unrivalled account of the history of worker education in South Africa and an unflinching critique of its contemporary reformist directions. It is also extremely well written, combining rich theoretical discussion with empirically-validated arguments, as well as accounts and stories from her research that add enormously to the texture and readability of the text. The book goes well beyond critique, examining the limits on and possibilities for a regeneration of radical theory and practice in this area. As such, it is an inspiration.