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What is 'useful' knowledge?

Richard Clarke

Most people would agree that all genuine knowledge (not 'fake facts') is potentially useful though a little knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing and, in the wrong company, knowing too much can be positively lethal. We're bombarded continually with 'facts' together with advice - 'useful' knowledge - how to get a job, improve your credit rating, save for a deposit on a house. Rarely are we helped to any real understanding of the workings of a society in which poverty is increasing amidst massive wealth for the few.

But two centuries ago a debate began about what knowledges were most useful. For liberal politicians and would-be social reformers, useful knowledge was, essentially, what would enable its recipients to contribute to the dynamics of a growing capitalist economy and at the same time to better themselves - with a job, a wage, a home and (for the men) a vote. That view found its expression in the growth of mechanics' institutions, a movement which from the first, London Mechanics' Institution (LMI, later Birkbeck College) grew until by the 1850s there were up to a thousand Mechanics' Institutions (sometimes called Literary and Scientific Institutions) in every major town in Britain.

Against this was another version of what its proponents called 'really' useful knowledge (in contrast to the 'merely useful' knowledge of what eventually came to be the orthodox educational curriculum). This was focused on collective, rather than individual 'self-help'; on the need to understand the workings of the economy and society and to challenge the *status quo* and build a different, less exploitative world. Thomas Hodgskin (who, ironically, had first proposed the establishment of the LMI) was one of its early proponents. In one of his first publications he observed that the 'landlord and the capitalist produce nothing. Capital is the produce of labour, and profit is nothing but a portion of that produce.' (1)

In August 1823 Hodgskin and a colleague, J. C. Robertson, launched the *Mechanics' Magazine*. Aimed at the literate working class under the slogans 'Knowledge is Power', and 'Ours and for Us', this cheap scientific weekly was the first of its kind and was highly successful. On 11 October the journal proclaimed the LMI's mission: 'to make working men acquainted not only with 'the facts of chemistry and of mechanical philosophy' but also 'of the creation and distribution of wealth'. They declared: 'The education of a free people,

like their property, will always be directed most beneficially for them when it is in their own hands. [. . .] Men had better be without education [. . .] than be educated by their rulers; for then education is but the breaking of the steer to the yoke.' (2)

Perhaps understandably, their aims were contentious: E. P. Thompson in his *The Making of the English Working Class* declares: 'The early history of the Mechanics' Institutes, from the formation of the London Institute in 1823 until the 1830s, is a story of ideological conflict. [. . .] The crucial conflicts took place on the questions of control, of financial independence, and if so whether or not the Institutes should debate political economy (and, if so, whose political economy). (3)

In the end pragmatism trumped principle: 'money talked'. (4) Hodgskin and Robertson who had initially put forward the initiative for a London Mechanics' Institute lacked influence and patronage and were 'out-maneuvred and out-financed'. (5) In the words of Eric Hobsbawm (who joined Birkbeck College as a young lecturer in 1947 and who was its President from 2002 until his death in 2012) 'The original founders were pushed aside' (6) and the Benthamite radicals 'took over and diverted' the LMI. (7) Control 'passed to the middle-class supporters whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus. (8) That ideology was reflected also in their new Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) and its output of improving texts.

Mechanics' Institutions spread. By mid-century there were up to a thousand of them. Most were 'under the control of the moneyed classes, and became props of orthodoxy and respectability instead of independent working-class organisations' (9). Many of them spawned 'auxiliaries' - building societies, friendly (insurance) societies, banks and, indeed, schools for their members' children, all aimed at realising for their members the benefits of sobriety, thrift and compliance with the status quo. The Birkbeck Building Society and its Bank (later absorbed into the London and Westminster and then into the Royal Bank of Scotland) was once the largest such in the world. The Penny Bank in the Huddersfield Mechanics Institute (later the Post Office Savings Bank) offered its investors the prospect of home ownership which - according to Samuel Smiles - makes 'men steady, sober and diligent. It weans them from revolutionary notions, and makes them conservative.' That's as true today as it

was then. There's nothing like a mortgage to make you fear losing your job - and your home.

The victory was never complete however. For a few years after its foundation, Hodgskin continued to lecture at the LMI. His first lectures were published as *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* (under the pseudonym of 'a Labourer') as were a second series, entitled *Popular Political Economy*. Both were widely read. Marx called *Labour Defended* 'this admirable work' (10) and Hodgskin 'one of the most important modern English economists' (11). *Popular Political Economy* provided the basis for Marx's labour theory of value and is quoted extensively in his notebooks, written between 1857 and 1858 and later edited by Engels as 'Volume 4' of *Capital*. Both were equally scathing about Mechanics' Institutes, Engels declaring that they were useless 'organs of the middle classes', their teachings 'uninspired and flabby'. Their purpose was to teach students 'to be subservient to the existing political and social order. All that the worker hears in these schools is one long sermon on respectful and passive obedience in the station of life to which he has been called. (12)

The issues of curriculum and control in working-class adult education have never gone away. However they are no longer a focus of adult education activists in the way they were during the Ruskin College 'strike' of 1909 and the inter-War Labour College movement (13). Post-16 education is increasingly narrowly focused on 'employability'; non-vocational adult education (which always provided a forum for political discussion) has collapsed, and as trade union education (including the TUC's UnionLearn from which the Government has now withdrawn its support) is concerned primarily with workplace issues and technical skills, courses offered by independent bodies such as the Marx Memorial Library are more important than ever. Journals such as *Post-16 Educator* and *Plebs News* keep the issues of control and curriculum alive. Challenges to curriculum continue to surface both on the part of adult educators and (although this has yet to match the 'counter-course' movement of the 1970s), on the part of students themselves, as exemplified by student societies at Cambridge, Essex, Glasgow, LSE, Manchester, Sheffield, SOAS and UCL, for a reform (and broadening) of the economics curriculum.

The critical issues of collective versus individual models of 'self-help', of 'useful' versus 'really useful' knowledge, of what working-class education could be like, how to secure it, and how independent it should be (from the state or from other forms of patronage) are still current, two centuries on.

Note

This article is based on a talk given on 24th February 2022 to the 'Useful Knowledge 200' conference

organised by Birkbeck, University of London, as part of its bicentenary celebrations. A longer article by the author 'Really useful' knowledge and 19th century adult worker education - what lessons for today? can be found in the journal *Theory and Struggle* issue 117 pp67-74 <https://doi.org/10.3828/ts.2016.17> text on <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/15057/>.

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