

CRITICAL WORK EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

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Richard Lakes seeks to fill a gap within critical education theory, which he claims has regarded vocational education strictly in terms of its role in the reproduction of class and occupational inequalities. Lakes does not disagree with that view of vocational education, but he hopes that “critical work education can transform vocational studies by preparing students for participatory politics in the workplace”¹ as integral to a broader cultural transformation toward market socialism and a more fully participatory political democracy.² Lakes’ paper presents a reasonable enough ideal for helping shape critical work education.

I join in condemning vocational education as it has been predominantly practiced in the U.S.. To say that it reproduces class, race, and gender injustice is only to begin the critique of programs which, at best, have served only the narrowest of working-class (and even ruling-class) interests.³ And, though Lakes conflates the critical tradition with the early work of the radical reproduction theorists, I agree that the lack of attention to the emancipatory prospects for vocational education deserves remedy. I will not argue with the particulars of Lakes’ ideal,⁴ but rather focus on challenges to critical work education and situate it within broader issues concerning participatory democracy. I offer a cautionary tale about the transformative power of critical work education.

First, I wonder for whom we should design critical work education. I think that “sociocultural studies — not skill-based instruction — offering vocationally-bound students the analytical tools with which to understand and act upon the political, social, economic, and historical conditions that create workplace inequities and employer injustices”⁵ should be provided for all students and not just “vocationally-bound” students.⁶ If we are to have a movement for democracy in the U.S., participation must come from the full range of vocations, and not just the blue-collar or pink-collar jobs now the locus of school programs and apparently referred to by Lakes. Not only all high-school students, but students at technical schools, community colleges and colleges need to be involved. Moreover, adult learners found beyond these more formal domains, within union and industrial education and training programs or independent labor education programs, should not be ignored.⁷ We need to beware of recreating the liberal compromise that shifts the burden and hope for justice and democracy onto schools and the “next” generation. I agree with Lakes that “economic and industrial democracy can be furthered by vigorous worker’s struggles for participatory employment rights,”⁸ so critical work education should be situated where it might support and extend these ongoing struggles. But how can schools and vocational education programs get connected to these struggles or help to foster them? Lakes offers no theory or guidance for how schools can be central players in these spheres.⁹

Nonetheless, Lakes hopes that critical work education can be linked to the class struggle, which he regards as the key lever in industrial changes that will “transform the corporate oligarchy” in a context of eliminated “layers of governmental regulations and legislation that protect private enterprise.”¹⁰ However, we cannot be confident that worker participation will contribute to such struggles or outcomes. In countries considered to be the prime examples of worker activism contributing to expanded political involvement and a more democratized economy,¹¹ “it is the non-democratic nature of the chain of command and the ineffectual position of the individual in the

organization that are challenged by the systems of worker participation....”¹² That is, workers tend to focus on the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of work, *not* on issues of private property or enterprise, nor on broader political concerns.

Not only do the real possibilities for democratic participation vary within differing sectors of the labor market with differing consequences for politics,¹³ but participation itself can be deployed by owners and managers to their own advantage. Industrial democracy, while alleviating some worker alienation, may primarily increase productivity and foster worker loyalty or obligation, thus providing stability and increased profits for the owners and managers without generating real power for workers. To complicate matters further, democratic workplaces may be at odds with unions and collective bargaining in certain ways. The exclusive position of unions, with representative structures, reduces the importance of the opinion of individual workers. Participatory work practices may conflict with long-fought-for demarcations in job skill classifications and advancement ladders or among production, office, and professional workers.

To understand the potential of critical work education, Lakes needs to clarify “participatory employment rights.” Historically this has been a contested domain variously concerned with the nature of work, the distribution of power within enterprises and society at large, and the future of industrial society itself.¹⁴ Worker participation alone, from the shop floor to the board room, is not a solution to the problems of highly segmented labor markets, job deskilling, risk allocation during structural adjustments in the economy, or frequent job transitions and the need for lifetime learning. Job security and access to free retraining may be more pressing concerns than political participation.

Thus, workers and owners may share interests in stability and security. This highlights two tensions, one in democratic theory and the other in the politics of the working class. A tradition in democratic theory extends from the social contract theorists, through both Mill and Marx, to the present advocates of worker participation, warning that democracy must be practiced throughout all levels of society if it is to be preserved as a political system. But too much democracy can lead to instability and, ironically, provide an opening for authoritarian solutions. Recent theorists who draw on this liberal and democratic socialist tradition argue that economic and industrial democracy are preconditions to social and political orders that are truly democratic, but emphasize representative rather than participatory structures.¹⁵ How should critical work education handle this tension?

Finally, we need to face political tensions and contradictions within the working class. Participatory, democratic work education and work sites are no guarantee of commitments to and action on progressive values that guarantee justice along race and gender (or even class) lines. Lakes assumes too much when he thinks “working-class activism” in participatory, democratic organizations entails progressive political or social positions.¹⁶ Similarly, critical education cannot directly engender critical citizens committed to emancipatory struggle. Lakes is in good company in these errant assumptions: Dewey’s democratic conception in education set criteria for free, full, varied, and numerous associations as the foundation for a participatory democratic society, but the inadequacies of this view have been often and thoroughly criticized.¹⁷ Participation and cooperation cannot guarantee “moral organizations” or “virtuous enterprises.”¹⁸ Workers, like criminal gangs, can democratically cooperate in evil, polluting the environment or building weapons of mass destruction. Likewise, class consciousness, class struggle, and class analysis can never be enough to ground a genuine emancipatory democratic culture. Arguments and examples abound to witness the sexist and racist limits of this perspective. We also need to be cautious about erring in the opposite direction, seeing critical work education as an antidote to “a laboring class of individuals who lack social vision, personal agency, and civic responsibility.”¹⁹ The great challenge is to situate a praxis attuned to the tensions and contradictions within and among the material historical conditions, ideological formations, and emancipatory possibilities of the working class.

There is much to commend Lakes’ vision of democracy in which “private” corporations are sites of “public” and “participatory” decision-making,²⁰ in which workers are conscious of their personal

and class interests and act consistently with them and in favor of the creation of a genuinely democratic culture. But the vision needs to be more inclusive of the specific needs and interests of women and people of color and other sectors also historically excluded from the realms of power in the limited democracy which has been America. Though it is true that without a vision the people perish, the vision which guides us must be adequate to the task at hand, sturdy enough to hold against strong challenges, and able to be articulated to realizable programs and to ongoing activities.

¹ Richard D. Lakes, "If Vocational Education Became Critical Work Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).

² Ibid.

³ I do not deny that these programs provide some valuable (though limited) skill training, but even this utility has diminished with the structural changes underway within capitalist economies.

⁴ Lakes' ideal for critical work education might be more compelling if located within an analysis of why vocational education is as it is, and of the probable allies and opponents of its transformation. Though he notes that "a vast array of progressive educational practitioners attempted to embody the Deweyan ideal of work education" but failed, he neither offers any explanation nor draws any lessons. Dewey himself vastly underestimated the degree of conflict within and among groups, and his vision ignored the difficulties presented by serious power imbalances. A vision of critical work education which ignores these matters will likely also prove blind.

⁵ Lakes.

⁶ Some researchers have suggested, for example, a model for high schools with close partnerships with work-site-training programs, although this model lacks the politics envisioned by Lakes. See David Stern, Marilyn Ruby, and Charles Dayton, *Career Academies* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

⁷ Much can be learned from some of these efforts in the non-formal domain. See Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship* (Santa Cruz, California: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980); or David Reed, *Education for Building a People's Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). The work of the Highlander Research and Education Center is exemplary — see Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire* (Winston-Salem: John Blair, 1975); or Myles Horton, *The Long Haul* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) — and the history of the labor colleges is also instructive, see Rolland G. Paulston, *Other Dreams, Other Schools* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980).

⁸ Lakes, referring to an argument developed by Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment: A Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁹ Here Lakes unfortunately joins many other critical education theorists who imagine schools as sites of struggle for democracy without credibly linking schools with broader movements that could potentially wield social and political power.

¹⁰ Lakes.

¹¹ Sweden or Germany, for example.

¹² Sherri DeWitt, *Worker Participation and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), 157.

¹³ See some discussion of this in Carmen Sirianni, "Worker Participation in the Late Twentieth Century: Some Critical Issues," in *Worker Participation and the Politics of Reform*, ed. C. Sirianni (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 27.

¹⁴ That owners and workers have used this notion for diverse motives and within contrasting contexts and struggles is hinted at by the following formulations: "worker participation, industrial democracy, worker's control, self-management, workplace democracy, codetermination, employee involvement, quality of work life." (Sirianni, 1987, 3)

¹⁵ See, for example, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), or Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁶ Lakes.

¹⁷ See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: MacMillan Free Press, 1966), especially Chapter 7.

¹⁸ Lakes.

¹⁹ Lakes.

²⁰ Lakes.

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