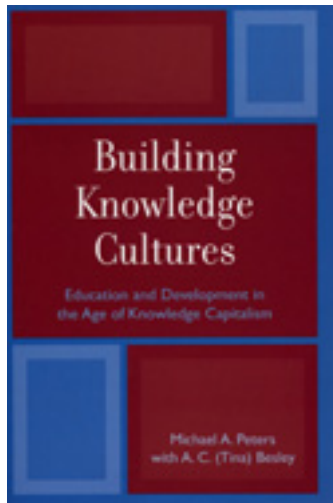# Book Review

Building Knowledge Cultures:
education and development in the age of knowledge capitalism
MICHAEL A. PETERS with A.C. (Tina) BESLEY, 2006
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
240 pp., paperback ISBN 978-0-7425-1791-2, $24.95, hardback ISBN 978-0-7425-1790-5, $72.00

Michael Peters and Tina Besley have written an overview of a really burning issue. Can we define a sound theory linking current discourses on the knowledge economy and current concerns with development? Their thesis not only includes an affirmative answer but also defines the main relevant concepts, namely, knowledge, education and development. Basically, they remind the readers that the whole endeavour might miss the point if the philosophical discussion of language and knowledge was overlooked.

Knowledge Networks

The hacker and novelist Neal Stephenson (1999) recently summarised a similar question with a very clear example. In his view, the most successful information technology (IT) business, Microsoft, eventually relies on people's beliefs about what an interface is. Although Windows is the best known operating system, a more effective tool such as Linux has been created by a worldwide, open, free and high-quality network of program developers. Microsoft engineers cannot anticipate if most users will decide to draw on Linux, because the success of these systems depends on a shared, collective mind instead of an intended plan. Eventually, this collective mind has emerged from complex, if not chaotic, processes that a big corporation is unable to control. Stephenson claims that this sort of knowledge network entails an immense potential for individual autonomy.

Peters & Besley (p. 165) extend the same claim to other cases. In Canada, the International Institute for Sustainable Development describes some of them, such as the collaboration between IT engineers and local participatory Panchayat institutions in India, between young researchers, social movements and local governments in Brazil, as well as between banks, unions, governments,

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements in the micro-credit Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme stages MDG.Net, a network inviting policy makers, scholars, NGOs and other associations to discuss useful policies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The authors also mention the Africa Virtual University (AVU), which works by detecting higher education unfulfilled needs in the region and organising international virtual courses as a response. Their final case is the Sustainable Development Communications Network; it provides online support to civil society organisations so that they can design and run their own websites for analogous, salient purposes with regard to human needs.

Knowledge and Development

The book hypothesises a connection between knowledge, education and development. As to *knowledge*, in the 1990s the World Bank attributed underdevelopment to a knowledge gap, but foresaw that the dissemination of formal education would overcome this shortcoming in the middle term. However, the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein recalls a broader concept than 'codified knowledge' (in school curricula, books, technical innovations and so on). This alternative, sounder definition should include tacit, practical skills as well as the codified contents, and even more, it should notice that the value of knowledge is deeply rooted in social relations (pp. 26-28). Although they do not discuss *education* theory in a systematic way, the authors observe that a network of social agents is involved in core educational activities such as universities (pp. 83-94) and social learning (pp. 113-136). With regard to *development*, their point is that the aforementioned knowledge networks yield very effective returns in as much as they stimulate practical learning and gather heterogeneous social agents (pp. 161-166).

Peters & Besley regret that the prevailing notion of knowledge leads to very controversial normative conclusions, which are grounded on flawed factual statements. On the one hand, Utilitarian analysis reduces the scope to the codified form, and assumes that economic actors invest their effort to know something in order to increase their individual returns. However, Joseph Stiglitz has replied that knowledge is a non-rivalrous good that does not increase at the expense of somebody else. Unlike land and labour, it can be created with no physical limitation. Neither it is concentrated and accumulated like capital. Other educationalists (e.g. the Ecuadorean-Argentinean Rosa María Torres) and economists (e.g. the Danish Bengt-Aake Lundvall) have also stated that copyrights and royalties neglect crucial dimensions of knowledge: for instance, 'know-why', 'know-how' and 'know-who', as well as implicit and practical knowledge. As a consequence, Stiglitz proposes an institutional regime that preserves this potential by only rewarding individual innovation with short-term advantages. On the other hand, Peters & Besley think that the subjects of knowledge are a variety of social agents. Instead of single researchers working for public or private organisations, it is a web of individuals that produces and applies knowledge while collaborating to achieve a certain goal. Therefore, the authors believe that the institutional regime should address to universities, corporations, NGOs, social movements, local authorities, national governments and international organisations.

The importance of intellectual property notwithstanding, we will complete our review by retaining some ideas which are particularly salient for other debates in the sociology of education. Certainly, it is easier for us to bring the issue to our immediate research interests, but we also feel there is a good reason to do so. Actually, since development requires fulfilling human needs, we need to inquire whether these knowledge networks can be institutionalised despite human poverty.

Concerning sociology, Peters & Besley (p. 183) suggest a methodological approach when they state that these networks should be actively promoted through public discussion of educational policy futures. Educational policy futures construct scenarios of possible trends, and the authors explicitly establish their basic methodological properties. In a nutshell, they maintain that scenarios should be inspired in an exhaustive account of reality, and grounded on a criterion of value.

In the next section we introduce a tentative comment about exhaustivity, in as much as it requires that equality and participatory governance are taken into consideration. The point about value deals with other also important issues, such as social justice, that we cannot nevertheless discuss from our specialty.

Equality, Participation and Knowledge Networks

In our view, knowledge networks are conducive to development wherever basic educational opportunities are universal and governance activities include participatory schemes. Actually, knowledge is obviously dependent on education, and networks are the vehicle of complex types of governance (instead of simple market or hierarchy types). The authors and some sociologists hypothesise that knowledge networks may emerge in many situations, but they are likely to be resilient where basic educational opportunities are widespread and participatory channels are attributed a stronger legitimation.

First, knowledge networks seem to grow in more fertile social environments if educational opportunities are available to everybody. As a matter of fact, educational expansion may be helpful for these networks, and they are also likely to root in more egalitarian societies. Current appraisals and overviews repeatedly mention important alleviation of inequality when two social changes take place: namely, the poor get secondary education, and positive synergies between schooling and social cohesion are institutionalised (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Green et al, 2003; Grundalch et al, 2001; López & Tedesco, 2002).

An initial comparative reasoning could observe significant chronological coincidences in both Latin America and South Asia. In the 1980s, although authoritarian rulers had to leave government in many Latin American countries, the political and intellectual tradition of community development did not recover the strength it had 20 years before. Actually, democratic transitions took place at the same time as debt crises and structural adjustments exacerbated poverty and inequality in the region. However, families decided to send children to school despite their material deprivation; afterwards, new community programmes like participatory budgets spread. Albeit in a slight way, in South Asia long-term changes alleviated poverty before knowledge networks started to operate. At least, Bangladesh had gained independence and economic sovereignty some years before the Grameen Bank was created, and government-led literacy campaigns preceded participatory Panchayats in Kerala. Certainly, we ignore if these are simple coincidences, but they invite us to guess which societal conditions contribute to building knowledge cultures.

Second, knowledge networks also seem to originate where participatory governance relies on a local tradition. Significantly, Peters & Besley's examples and Fung & Wright's (2003, p. 15) cases of empowered participatory governance overlap at several points. Empowered participatory governance requires a focus on specific, tangible problems, as well as involvement of ordinary people affected by these problems and officials close to them, and the deliberative development of solutions to these problems. At least, these circumstances may have triggered innovative network-driven solutions for local development in Porto Alegre (Brazil) and Kerala (India).

Furthermore, participatory governance is directly involved in the social production of knowledge. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006a, b) looks for silenced voices by means of the sociology of 'absences' and 'emergences'. The first one is an intellectual concern with subaltern images of reality, beliefs, views, proposals and preferences so that they come to the surface of political contention. The second one consists of intercultural translation between different but complementary political projects (e.g. José Martí's in Latin America and Gandhi's in India). Doubtless, some of Peters & Besley's networks, such as AVU and MDG.net, are the outcome of similar endeavours.

From this stance, another corollary proceeds through the search of discursive dark sides. In essence, multiple agents create useful knowledge, but some techniques of government may also hinder the recognition of their voices (e.g. reified messages about inexorable globalisation). Norman Fairclough (2003) has spelt out many rhetorical indicators of these linguistic moves by exploring how nominalisation of social phenomena, apparent statements of fact and additive lists of

contemporary changes are often used to produce those 'absences'; that is, to subordinate the world-views of the weak.

In sum, the authors advise researchers to assess the contribution of education to knowledge networks and development. Their thesis challenges one-dimensional, Utopian and naïve images of the knowledge economies, as well as entails fresh suggestions for social analysis. They highlight significant empirical connections between equality and participation, on the one hand, and knowledge networks, on the other hand. Important future changes greatly depend on either the realisation or the failure of these possibilities.

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