

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Understanding education: a sociological perspective, by S. Gewirtz and A. Cribb, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009, 240 pp., £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-74-563345-9

Reviewed by Maria Balarin, Rob Moore, and Ronald G. Sultana

In a field like sociology of education, which has tended towards the proliferation rather than integration of theories, this book provides a starting point to bridge some of the central debates and perspectives. In this respect, the book can be read as part of a current and much welcome trend that seeks to overcome the objectivist/subjectivist divide in social theorising. The authors do this by carefully charting the field through a discussion of some of the central issues that have dominated it and of the perspectives from which these issues have been approached.

Throughout the book, the authors highlight the importance of the normative agenda in the sociology of education, which provides a heuristic tool to navigate the disparate and often contradictory claims made by sociologists working from different perspectives, and constitutes a key element in the practice of 'reflexive' sociology that they seek to advance. This focus on the normative – that is, on researchers' values and on the ethical and political concerns that implicitly or explicitly shape different research agendas – sets the ground from which to judge competing claims about educational issues. The ethical reflexivity that the authors advocate thus constitutes an essential element of academic rigour, which they place alongside epistemic and methodological rigour.

The claim made in the book about the pervasive and inescapable presence of the normative dimension in sociological research somewhat echoes the idea first advanced by Dale (2001) and recently retaken by Lauder, Brown, and Halsey (2010) that sociology of education is characterised by a 'redemptive' agenda, characterised by concerns with inequality and inclusion. Gewirtz and Cribb add to this by exploring the different and often contradictory criteria that are necessary to judge knowledge production and use. It is in relation to the latter – that is, to considerations about the practical and policy implications of knowledge – that ethical reflexivity becomes crucial. The authors' concerns in relation to the ethical and political dimensions of sociological research, however, does not amount to equating knowledge with power, as they emphasise that ethical reflexivity needs to be set alongside cognitive criteria

Sociological Perspective In Education A Reader

Michael Rajnik



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