

# TWO WORLDS, COLONIALISM ON THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE, AND THE JUST LEARNING SOCIETY: A RENEWED VISION FOR ADULT EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

*The dualistic nature of adult education as serving the instrumental needs of the workplace, for instance, while remaining committed to issues of social justice is examined in light of the “two worlds” metaphor borrowed from an Indigenous point of view. A brief and selective history of colonialism in Canada—specifically the Southern Numbered Treaties (1871–77) and the White Paper policy of 1969—is presented in view of the implications of these historic flashpoints for adult education as educative practice in relationship with the marginalized of society, including Indigenous peoples, new immigrants, women, and the urban poor. Michael Welton’s vision of a just learning society is considered as a renewed vision of adult education, characterized by a more inclusive, equitable educative practice. Questions are raised about the future of adult education, especially as situated within the academy, and what that means for the relationships of adult educators with communities beyond academia.*

## **Résumé**

*La nature dualiste de l’éducation des adultes comme servant les besoins instrumentaux du lieu de travail, par exemple, tout en restant engagé dans les questions de justice sociale est examinée à la lumière de la métaphore des «deux mondes», emprunté à un point de vue autochtone. Une brève et sélective histoire de colonialisme au Canada est présentée sur les traités numérotés du Sud (1871-77) et de la politique du Livre blanc de 1969. Ces points d’éclair historiques sont présentées compte tenu de leurs implications pour l’éducation des adultes comme pratique éducative en relation avec les groupes marginalisés de la société, y compris les peuples autochtones, les nouveaux immigrants, les femmes*

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*et les pauvres des villes. La vision de Michael Welton d'un "juste" société de l'apprentissage est considéré comme une vision renouvelée de l'éducation des adultes, caractérisée par une pratique éducative plus inclusif, équitable. Des questions sont soulevées quant à l'avenir de l'éducation des adultes, notamment comme situé dans l'académie, et ce que cela signifie pour les relations de l'éducation des adultes avec les communautés au-delà du milieu universitaire.*

In an Indigenous<sup>1</sup> context, the metaphor of "two worlds" speaks to the value, and the challenge, of having to live and navigate within both white and Indigenous cultures. The metaphoric two worlds may be expressed ideally as "a likeness between being bilingual and bicultural and walking comfortably in two very different places" (Henze & Venett, 1993, p. 118). Yet I suspect that having to traverse both worlds can bring many more trials and disappointments than blessings. In this sense, adult education is also of two worlds, with interests governed by the instrumentality of the workplace, often at odds with the needs of the disenfranchised. Adult education in effect serves two masters, two worlds (Welton, 1995).

The Indigenous story of "Coyote's Eyes" may offer insight into the nature of this Janus-like duality of adult education. Within Indigenous epistemology, Coyote is known as a "trickster character," a "transformer figure, one whose transformations often use humour, satire, self-mocking and absurdity to carry good lessons" (Archibald, 2008, p. 5). The story is presented here in part with Coyote having lost both of her/his/its eyes through an unfortunate turn of events that leads to a thought-provoking end (Tafoya, 1982, as cited in Archibald, 2008, pp. 8–11).

"Eenee snawai, I'm just pitiful," Coyote cried.

"Why are you so sad?" asked a small voice, for little mouse had heard him.

"My dear Cousin," said Coyote, "I've lost my eyes ... I'm blind, and I don't know what to do."

"Snawai Yunwai," replied Mouse. "You poor thing. I have two eyes, so I will share one with you." Having said this, Mouse removed one of his eyes and handed it to Coyote. Now Coyotes are much larger than mice, and when Coyote dropped Mouse's eye into his socket, it just rolled around in the big empty space. The new eye was so small it only let in a tiny amount of light. It was like looking at the world through a little hole.

Coyote walked on, still feeling sorry for himself, just barely able to get around with Mouse's eye. "Eenee snawai, I'm just pitiful," he sobbed.

"Why are you crying, Coyote?" asked Buffalo in his deep voice.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Indigenous* is used synonymously with other terms such as *First Nation* or *Indian* and is meant to include all people of Aboriginal ancestry in both historical and contemporary contexts.

“Oh Cousin,” began Coyote, “all I have to see with is this tiny eye of the Mouse. It’s so small it only lets in a little bit of light, so I can barely see.”

“Snawai Yunwai,” replied Buffalo. “You poor thing, I have two eyes, so I will share with you.” Then Buffalo took out one of his eyes and handed it to Coyote. Now Buffaloes are much larger than Coyotes, and when Coyote tried to squeeze Buffalo’s eye into his other socket, it hung over into the rest of his face. So large was Buffalo’s eye that it let in so much light, Coyote was nearly blinded by the glare ... everything looked twice as large as it ordinarily did. And so, Coyote was forced to continue his journey, staggering about with his mismatched eyes.

The image of Coyote stumbling along with a view of the landscape, skewed and disproportioned, is reflective in a metaphoric sense of the potential for imbalance between the worlds of instrumentality and social purpose that have made their mark on adult education as educative practice. This essay, then, endeavours to address the implications of a potentially underlying sense of disequilibrium for adult education. I draw upon the work of Michael Welton (2005) in his study of the just learning society, a view of adult learning inspired by the human potential found within the associative spirit of the Habermasian lifeworld, as a way to find a balance between the two masters of adult education. I begin contextually, however, with a brief and selective account of the colonial history of the Canadian prairie, with its legacy of injustice for Indigenous peoples.

### **A History of Colonialism**

I live on the Canadian prairie. To fully understand the social reality that underwrites life in this part of the country, if only from an academic perspective, one needs to take into view the history of colonialism and its implications in particular for the Indigenous peoples of this land. The term *Indigenous*, as Wilson (2008) describes it, is “inclusive of all first peoples—unique in our own cultures—but common in our experiences of colonialism and our understanding of the world” (p. 16). A history of colonialism is etched deeply into the character of the Canadian prairie. Mulholland (2006) writes that, given our history since the time of European contact, “it is impossible to ignore colonization as a political, social and cultural influence on my life as a teacher” (p. 194). In this sense, a history of colonialism on the Canadian prairie offers a useful starting point toward a more balanced and equitable understanding of adult education. I focus, then, on two historical flashpoints: the Southern Numbered Treaties (1871–77) and the White Paper policy of 1969, both with significant implications for Indigenous peoples and, further, for adult education as an educative practice serving at once the interests of instrumentality and social justice.

*The Southern Numbered Treaties (1871–77)*

Through the passing of the *British North America Act*, 1867 (“*BNA Act*,” subsequently repatriated as the *Constitution Act*, 1982), the newly formed Government of Canada assumed responsibility for Indigenous peoples and the lands reserved for them through Section 91, which granted the Parliament of Canada the authority to “make Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada” (Department of Justice Canada [JC], 2012). Specifically, section 91(24) of the *BNA Act* granted “exclusive Legislative Authority” to the federal government for “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians” (JC, 2012).<sup>2</sup> The view taken by the federal government toward the First Nations of Canada may be best appreciated, however, through the subsequent adoption of the *Indian Act* in 1876, which served to consolidate all other legislation for Indigenous peoples. Notably, the *Indian Act* was reflective of a shift within Canadian provinces in the mid-19th century away from an emphasis on trade and diplomacy toward more of a focus on a “civilization policy” for the First Nations (Miller, 2009) that involved, for example, encouraging Indigenous peoples to relinquish their Indian status in exchange for voting rights through the *Gradual Civilization Act* of 1857 (Dickason & McNab, 2009). At its core, the *Indian Act* cast the relationship of the government and Indigenous peoples as one between trustee and ward, as expressed in an 1876 Department of the Interior report:

Our Indian legislation generally rests on the principle that the Aborigines are to be kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the state ... It is clearly our wisdom and our duty, through education and other means, to prepare him for a higher civilization by encouraging him to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship. (as cited in Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2011)

The underlying notion of Indigenous peoples as wards of the state originated with a parliamentary inquiry in Britain into the conditions of Indigenous peoples throughout the empire. The *Aborigines Report* (1837) concluded that unregulated expansion would be disastrous for Indigenous peoples—a prophetic report, considering that most did lose their lands. As a result, in Canada, Britain declared First Nations lands as Crown lands, making the British Crown their protector and guardian (Blackstock, 2000; Dickason & McNab, 2009). By 1860, however, Britain relinquished this role to its Canadian colonies, which signalled the beginning of a new settler society in place of earlier military-diplomatic relations (Miller, 2009).

Within months of the proclamation of Confederation in 1867, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald negotiated the cession of Rupert’s Land<sup>3</sup> from the Hudson’s Bay Company. The decades following Confederation witnessed a wave of settlers to the Canadian prairie that signalled the demise of the fur trade and the rise of a new economy of timber,

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2 While Section 91(24) of the *BNA Act/Constitution Act* (1867/1982) grants the federal government jurisdiction for Indigenous education in Canada, Section 93 grants jurisdiction to the provinces to “exclusively make Laws in relation to education” with respect, for instance, to K–12 schools.

3 Charles I named the British North American territory of the Hudson’s Bay Company (including present-day northern Quebec, northern Ontario, all of Manitoba, most of Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, and a portion of the Northwest Territories) after his nephew Prince Rupert of the Rhine (Waite, 1999).

mining, and notably agriculture tied together through the anticipated construction of the transcontinental railway that would bring Rupert's Land into the new Dominion. The new economy of western Canada required the lands of the First Nations, who were increasingly seen as "impediments to progress" (Miller, 2009; Waite, 1999). Hence, treaty making was viewed as a key part of this grand scheme. The Southern Numbered Treaties (1871–77) took within their scope vast territories that extended west from northern Ontario to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>4</sup> As a whole, the terms of the treaties included provision of reserve lands and of farming equipment and tools, seed, and, significantly, instruction in cultivation and horticulture, as set out by the Bagot Commission of 1842–44 (Dickason & McNab, 2009). Throughout the treaty negotiations and the treaties themselves, however, reference was made invariably to a rhetorical sense of kinship shared among the First Nations peoples with the federal government's treaty negotiators, reflective of the recent fur trade in Rupert's Land and a history of treaty making dating back to the 17th century (Miller). This rhetorical form is illustrated, for example, by Alexander Morris (as treaty commissioner and lieutenant-governor of Manitoba) in the negotiations of the Qu'Appelle Treaty (Treaty 4):

You are the subjects of the Queen, you are her children, and you are only a little band to all her other children. She has children all over the world, and she does right with them all. She cares as much for you as she cares for her white children, and the proof of it is that wherever her name is spoken her people whether they be red or white, love her name and are ready to die for it, because she is always just and true. What she promises never changes. (1880/1991, p. 94)

As treaty commissioner, however, Morris was well aware of the rhetorical effect of referring to Queen Victoria as the Queen Mother in the spirit of shared kinship and, moreover, "as a symbol of power and compassion" (Miller, 2009, p. 159). From an Indigenous perspective, the key to establishing and maintaining good relations in trade, for example, was through kinship; that is, "the notion of attempting to deal impersonally with unrelated people, whether in commerce or for any other purpose, was both alien and anathema to First Nations societies" (p. 7). In that sense, First Nations leaders understood their relationship with the federal government, at least in part, as one of kinship, as "brother to brother and sister to sister under their mutual parent, the Great White Queen Mother" (p. 190). This is in striking contrast to the view taken from within the *Indian Act* of 1876, which looked to the relationship of the government with First Nations peoples as one of trustee and ward, adult and child.

Through the treaties, the goal of securing peaceful access to land and resources was achieved. Following in the wake of the Southern Numbered Treaties, however, the near disappearance of the vast herds of buffalo upon which Indigenous peoples of the Canadian prairie had depended, and the government's neglect in assisting them as promised with their transition to sedentary agriculture, caused enormous hardship, as it was difficult

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4 See Dickason and McNab (2009) for a map of the areas of Canada that were included in the treaties and agreements, including the Southern Numbered Treaties (1871–77) and the Northern Numbered Treaties (1899–1921), the pre-confederation treaties, and the areas exempt by the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

even for farming settlers arriving on the prairie to harvest a crop given a dry climate and relatively short growing season (Dickason & McNab, 2009; Miller, 2009). Agriculture on the Canadian prairie did not begin to flourish until the turn of the century, which brought the end of a global recession, the arrival of American immigrants with experience in farming on the plains, a number of years of high precipitation, and the development of Marquis wheat (a variety that produced high yields and matured earlier than the commonly used Red Fife) (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2007; Waite, 1999). By the time the Northern Numbered Treaties (1899–1921) were completed, Canadians had lost interest in treaty making as a means of acquiring First Nations lands. It was not until the 1970s when the Government of Quebec announced its plans for a hydroelectric project in the James Bay region that Canada renewed its pursuit of treaties with First Nations peoples. Up until that time, the federal government had become more interested in assimilating the First Nations than in negotiating with them (Miller, 2009), an attitude that characterized them mainly as “recipients of change” (Cairns, 2000) rather than as partners—reminiscent of the spirit of trade and diplomacy that marked (at least in part) the relationship between Eurocentric and Indigenous peoples of earlier eras.

### *The White Paper of 1969*

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chrétien released in 1969 the Canadian government’s statement on Indigenous policy, known as the “White Paper,” which recommended a new direction leading “to the full, free and non-discriminatory participation of the Indian people in Canadian society” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada [AANDC], 2010). The White Paper policy was meant effectively to symbolize a break with the past. Based on a liberal view of equality and innate individuality, the policy paper attempted in Lockean fashion to wipe the slate clean by replacing the dependence of First Nations peoples, as wards of the state, with a newly conceived “role of equal status, opportunity and responsibility, a role they can share with all other Canadians” (AANDC, 2010). In essence, the White Paper echoed the sentiments of Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, for the enfranchisement of First Nations through the *Compulsory Enfranchisement Bill* of 1920 to “get rid of the Indian problem ... to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department” (Miller, 2009, p. 223). Hence, the goal of the Trudeau administration to rid itself of the “Indian problem” was not entirely new to the relationship of the federal government with the First Nations of Canada.

Underlying the White Paper was a belief in the notion of an undifferentiated citizenship that provided the rationale for the Trudeau administration to recommend the removal of Section 91(24) of the *BNA Act* (1867) and subsequently repeal the *Indian Act* (1876), which authorized the federal government to administer the affairs of Indigenous peoples as a distinctive group within Canadian society. Trudeau opposed the special status and collective rights of Indigenous peoples implied through these statutes and intended to transfer to the provincial governments the responsibility to treat Indigenous peoples as individual citizens in the liberal sense, just as they would other citizens within their respective jurisdictions (FitzMaurice, 2011; Tester, McNicoll, & Forsyth, 1999). The

federal government's position was not without implication, as indicated by Russell (2003), who observes that "if full and equal access to the rights and opportunities of the society that settlers had built meant that Indigenous peoples had to abandon their own societies and the elements of them so crucial to their well-being and identity, then for most it would be too great a price to pay" (p. 76). This was, indeed, the general consensus among the First Nations of Canada that led eventually to the White Paper's demise.

The defeat of the White Paper signified more than the rejection of a bold policy initiative. Its defeat was symbolic of the renunciation of a historical and continuing policy of assimilation taken up by successive administrations since Confederation (Cairns, 2000). Reflective of the White Paper's rejection, *Citizens Plus* (known as the "Red Paper") was drafted and presented to the federal government by the Indian Association of Alberta under the leadership of Harold Cardinal and with support of the National Indian Brotherhood (which became the Assembly of First Nations in 1982) (Dickason & McNab, 2009). *Citizens Plus* as a concept, however, was borrowed from the two-volume *Hawthorn Report*, undertaken in the mid-1960s as an investigation of the social and economic circumstances facing the First Nations. In the *Hawthorn Report*, the concept of *Citizens Plus* is introduced as the right of Indigenous peoples to membership within Canadian society as derived "from promises made to them, from expectations they were encouraged to hold, and from the simple fact that they once occupied and used a country to which others came to gain enormous wealth in which the Indians have shared little" (Hawthorn, 1966, p. 6). From the perspective of the First Nations, the treaties are central to their relationship with the Government of Canada and the people who have come to inhabit its lands (and this is perhaps an understatement). At issue, however, is how the treaties have been used to put into effect the grand designs of successive administrations since Confederation. Yet as Miller (2009) suggests in his historical account and analysis of treaty making in Canada, treaties still carry the potential for producing greater social cohesion within the fabric of Canadian society—that is, if non-Indigenous people were to acknowledge themselves as beneficiaries of treaty making. This view of the treaties in terms of the consequent relationship of white settler society and Indigenous peoples is reflected especially through the expression "we are all treaty people" (see Epp, 2008; Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2012).

Taken from the perspective of adult education as defined through "a set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage and rooted in a concern for the less-privileged" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17), the social inequalities and injustices left behind by the treaties and the proposed White Paper policy are not without implication for Canadian adult educators. The remainder of this essay will look, then, to the notion of the just learning society as a way toward reconciling issues of social justice, such as those suffered by Indigenous peoples, for example, by way of a colonial past that has with little doubt left its mark on our common social fabric.

### **A Renewed Vision for Adult Education**

At the heart of Michael Welton's (2005) vision for adult education resides an inherent faith in the capacity of humankind to discover what it is and, further, to imagine what it is

capable of becoming. The ideal of the just learning society offers a way to meeting these aspirations as an alternative to the increasingly pervasive view of the need for an educative practice of instrumentality directed toward pre-determined ends.

In his work on the just learning society, Welton (2005) turns to the critical framework of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action in two volumes, particularly his theoretical framework of "societies *simultaneously* as systems and lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1984b, p. 118), as understood respectively through the two general orientations of strategic action and communicative action. In strategic action, individuals attempt to influence others as a calculative means to achieve chosen ends. This form of action is notably characteristic of the complex social and economic organizations found in modern societies, where "the controlling medium of these systems is not language, but the steering media of economic and administrative power" (Coulter, 2002, p. 31). Communicative action, however, occurs "whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding" (Habermas, 1984a, pp. 285–286) through the lifeworld as "the source of human activity, connectedness and meaningfulness" (Welton, 2005, p. 181). Pedagogically, the lifeworld serves as a learning space in which actors may be enabled "to speak and act with confidence, resilience, verve and imagination, placing them in a position to take part in processes of reaching an understanding and thereby asserting their own identities" (Welton, 2005, p. 183). Habermas's well-known metaphor of the colonization of the lifeworld, however, serves to illustrate how economic and administrative systems "set their own imperatives against the marginalized lifeworld" (Welton, 1995, p. 143) that effectively "take over the integrative functions which were formally fulfilled by consensual values and norms" (Habermas, 1992, p. 171). This has, in effect, resulted in disturbances or pathological side effects such as "loss of meaning, feelings of powerlessness, unhappiness in the midst of a glut of material possessions, despair over deepening discrepancies between rich and poor, social fragmentation, moral confusion, personality disorders and addictions" (Welton, 2005, p. 180). "Defending the lifeworld," as Welton (1995) puts it, is perhaps the definitive challenge for adult education today.

The just learning society has its roots in the well-known notion of the learning society in which adult educators have historically been interested. Alan Thomas (1961) once observed, "The concept of the learning society, like learning itself, involves not mere addition to the present, child-oriented educational structure or an increased number of participants, but demands that concern for continuous learning be a central feature of national policy." Linked symbiotically with the learning society, the notion of lifelong learning was recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970s as a way toward reducing educational gaps in society (Rubenson & Walker, 2006). Such optimism was quickly overtaken by a second generation of lifelong learning, however, with attention given principally to economic concerns of rising unemployment, declining productivity, and budget deficits that marked the later decades of the 20th century. This imperative is reflected, for instance, through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and its view of the learning society not as a society per se, but as a "learning economy" as defined through "the acquisition of competence and skills that allow the learning individual to be more successful in reaching individual goals or those of his/her organization ... the kind of

learning most crucial to economic success” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000, p. 29). From within that framework, the ideal of lifelong learning once understood as a positive direction taken by governments and individuals in moving “learning from formal institutions to the everyday sphere” (Boshier, 2005, p. 373) has been overtaken or colonized, so to speak, by an economic imperative driven by the demands of the ubiquitous global marketplace (Gustavsson, 2002; Rubenson & Walker, 2006).

In light of the idea of the learning society and its development throughout the latter part of the 20th century into an instrumentally and economically driven approach to educative practice, Welton (2005) offers the notion of the just learning society as a conceivable alternative. This view of the learning society, as a justly determined educative society, is captured through UNESCO’s Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning as “*the right to education and the right to learn* throughout life ... the right to read and write, the right to question and analyse, the right to have access to resources, and to develop and practice individual and collective skills and competences” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1997). This was, as Welton (2005) observes, perhaps the first time that the notion of the learning society was linked expressly with social justice within the historical discourse of adult education.

The idea of a just learning society with its definitive aim at issues of social justice, however, is revealed historically through the efforts of Canadian adult educators of the first half of the 20th century. The work of Moses Coady (see Welton, 2001), for example, is highlighted as having acknowledged “the collective journeys of many ordinary Canadians on farms, at sea, and in the factories and households who were becoming enlightened about the causes of their suffering and were learning how to gain power and act to change their life situations in the early twentieth century” (Welton, 2006, p. 25). Similarly Guy Henson recognized that the “associative life of civil society” had a significant effect on the learning adult; that is, “the newspaper, magazine and book, the radio, the film, the church, the political parties, occupational associations, social and fraternal groups form a complex of agencies which have the main part in transmitting knowledge and opinions to grown-up people” (1946, as cited in Welton, 2006, p. 32). As Watson Thomson, who in 1944 was charged with the responsibility of starting up a grassroots campaign for adult education in Saskatchewan, once phrased it, “No study without action, no action without study” (as cited in Welton, 2011, p. 8). That insight is as applicable now to adult educators as it was over a half-century ago.

Thomson’s words are reminiscent of Paulo Freire’s (1972) well-known conceptualization of praxis as a symbiotic synthesis of reflection and action, reminding us that “in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers” (p. 60). Underlying Freire’s perspective on finding equilibrium between reflection and action, however, is the importance of engaging in dialogue as a “humanizing praxis” (much like Habermas’s theory of communicative action toward reaching understanding). In the spirit of humanizing praxis, Erica-Irene Daes, in her address to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples at the UNESCO conference on education in 1999, affirmed that meeting the responsibility of displacing systematic discrimination for Indigenous peoples “is not just a problem for the colonized and the oppressed, but rather the defining challenge for all peoples. It is the path to a shared and sustainable future for

all peoples" (as cited in Battiste, 2004, p. 59). Realizing the full meaning and implications of a colonial history through the Southern Numbered Treaties, for example, is an important first step in reclaiming the vision of the just learning society as an educative space. This is, however, a pursuit best shared dialogically in the company of others. Adult education as collaborative educative practice directed toward the interests of social justice is at its best, as Freire once noted, as a humanizing praxis with equal measures of both action and reflection.

### Two Worlds Revisited

Returning to the Indigenous story of "Coyote's Eyes," I am left to wonder at the present state of adult education as reflected potentially through the image of Coyote staggering about with her/his/its mismatched and disproportionate views of the surrounding landscape. In adult education, the value of instrumentality, governed by the performance-driven needs of the workplace, is generally left unquestioned, while issues of a broader social purpose, or social justice, seem to be regarded all too often as side issues, as points of interest or curiosities along the bustling roadside of material progress. The communicative theory of Jürgen Habermas serves well as a theoretical framework in which to make sense of the disequilibrium set between the masters of instrumentality and social purpose served by adult education (Welton, 1995). Indeed, it seems at times that adult education has been effectively overtaken, perhaps colonized, by a view of educative practice singularly determined by a systemic economic imperative well beyond the reach of adult educators.

Michael Welton's vision of a just learning society is timely given the conceptual evolution of learning societies as subsidiary to an economic imperative with its precise and measured focus on increased efficiencies and productivity. Within that framework, however, a discourse of lifelong learning devoted specifically to issues of social justice has taken shape across the globe, particularly within the Global South (Abdi & Kapoor, 2009), which was subjected historically to colonial rule in the heyday of the 19th century, the era of Pax Britannica (or British Peace) that spanned most of that century up to World War One, a period of history marked by "the greatest extension of direct colonial rule in modern times" (Roberts, 1992, p. 764). As a proponent of lifelong learning in its truly humanistic sense, Semali (2009), for example, looks to Indigenous (i.e., African) innovation as a way "to build the capacities of farmers' groups, women's groups, youth, and communities to identify their needs, community assets, the collective capacity for innovation and creating new alternatives for resource-poor farmers, especially women" (p. 36). Through such contemporary perspectives on Indigenous learning, one might catch the echo of early Canadian adult educators of the first decades of the 20th century who witnessed the hardship of two world wars and a global economic depression. The work of these early adult educators may be characterized by a sense of compassion and faith in the ability of everyday people to gather in common, deliberative learning spaces, inspired by the spirit of associationalism,<sup>5</sup> as Guy Henson (1946) once observed, "to use their intelligence, their skill and their finest qualities for economic and social progress, and for

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5 Associationalism makes the claim that "individual liberty and human welfare are both best served when as many of the affairs of society as possible are managed by voluntary and democratically self-governing associations" (Hirst, 1994, p. 16).

achieving a richer and happier life” (as cited in Welton, 2006, p. 33). The vision of the just learning society as a view of adult education with social purpose is perhaps as relevant today to the issues facing the Indigenous peoples of the Canadian prairie, as members of a globally Indigenous population left in the wake of over a century of colonial rule, as it was to the disenfranchised, marginalized, and forgotten Canadians of over a half-century ago.

The vision of the just learning society is as relevant today as it was to early Canadian adult educators who looked to the learning spaces found within the associative life of civil society, as Guy Henson once phrased it, as ideally suited to the needs of adult learners of the day. The question may be raised, however, as to whether adult educators of the present age may be able to take up the work of the just learning society as envisioned over a century ago. Returning to Nesbit (2006) on the enduring traditions of Canadian adult education, I am reminded of the importance of an “unyielding social purpose,” as supported by a critical view of the societal structures of the status quo; yet I wonder about the third and final tradition of a “keen attention to specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made in the real lives of Canadians” (p. 17). Does an unyielding social purpose captured through “a systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis” (p. 17) really have much bearing at all upon the lives of marginalized Canadians?

In a recent commentary upon the state of adult education in Canada, as situated notably within the academy, Welton (2011) offers some perspective on the practice of adult education as we make our way into the 21st century. He calls on adult educators to reimagine themselves “as a crucial public sphere within the learning society” (p. 8) in direct reference to the emancipatory tradition of Canadian adult education that took root in the early decades of the past century through “a space dedicated to inviting many different actors in Canadian society to engage in a dialogue about how we can create a just learning society” (p. 8). This would require, however, an educative (not necessarily an academic) space reminiscent of the associative spirit of early adult educators, found perhaps through the Habermasian lifeworld, yet mindful of the Indigenous principle of “right relations” (Calliou, 1995) as a reminder of the differences between education as the duty of the fitter self toward less fortunate others and the notion of learning from others, as a demonstration of humility—a notion of importance to an Indigenous worldview (Lightning, 1992). Much like Coyote with her/his/its mismatched eyes, the practice of adult education as situated within the academy, at least, may be distinguished by an imbalance between the competing masters, or worlds, of instrumentality and social purpose; however, this disparity might be imagined further as one between the ever-present pull of academic credentialing against the educative needs of communities inhabited, for example, by the urban poor, disenfranchised women, and marginalized immigrants situated well beyond the boundaries of the academy. To what extent, then, are adult educators, as members of the academy, able to traverse and walk comfortably within these worlds? This is a question that once again could define the practice of adult education in Canada, as it did a century ago.

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