PERSPECTIVES

THE ALBERTA EXPERIENCE: A RETURN TO POPULAR EDUCATION?

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Abstract

The rise of the Canadian welfare state following the Second World War significantly contributed to the demise of radical adult education. But what of now? Alberta Premier Ralph Klein has charted a deficit-busting course, thereby violating the social contract and shackling adult education to the needs of the affluent. Will economic "necessity" precipitate a crisis of legitimation? And how will adult educators respond to the demands for conscientization from the working class? This article explores the author's impressions of contemporary adult education and its catalytic role in social change in the context of neo-Marxist literature.

Résumé

La croissance de l'État-providence au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale eut pour effet d'affaiblir considérablement le mouvement radical d'éducation des adultes. Or, qu'en est-il aujourd'hui? En Alberta, le premier ministre Ralph Klein a déclaré la guerre au déficit, violant de ce fait le contrat social et assujettissant l'éducation des adultes aux priorités de la classe opulente. La «nécessité économique» précipitera-t-elle une crise de légitimation? Comment l'éducation des adultes répondra-t-elle aux demandes de conscientisation de la classe ouvrière? Cet article fait état des impressions de l'auteur, dans le contexte des écrits néo-marxistes, quant au rôle de l'éducation des adultes en tant que catalyseur pour le changement social.

Introduction

Armed with a junior high school education and a mandate to "get Alberta's fiscal house in order," Ralph Klein may be the unwitting harbinger of popular education's return to Canada's mainstream. And Canadian adult education–primarily a willing minion of society's dominant culture–will return to its popular (née radical) roots as an integral part of movements for social change.

The political issue in late capitalist society is who can run the economy best. Jürgen Habermas posits that economic crises thus rapidly become political ones. Mainly a pragmatic affair, Canadian politics is unable to generate or sustain loyalty: governmental legitimacy is based on harnessing science and technology to actualize the false grail of sustained economic growth (Gidden, 1985). Oxymoronic, sustained economic growth is premised on the dual fallacies of post-war affluence and unlimited natural resources.

These fallacies are evidenced to most Canadians by our social welfare system: maintaining a relatively equal society justifies the upper-class domination of our economy, a domination often voluntarily ignored by Canadians. The Klein government's dismantling of the welfare system and the federal government's transfer-payment blood-letting will quickly erode our illusion of competent management for the benefit of all Canadians. Habermas's crisis of legitimization is beginning.

However, the habits acquired by the adult education community during the 1960s and 1970s remain with us, reflecting our acquiescence to never fulfilled promises of meaningful social reform. I question three facets of adult education's role in society:

1. Adult education's Canadian roots lie in the social change movement. Yet in recent years, this tradition has been superseded by one which emphasizes adjusting the individual to society. Why has this happened?

2. Our political system is a capitalist one which is necessarily and increasingly inequitable. It doesn't seem reasonable that an inequitable system could continue without some form of social control. What is the basis of this control and is it successful?

3. Canada's current social transformation–including an unfortunate rise in neoconservatism–is changing the fundamental dynamic of the relationship between the state and the people. What will the result(s) be?

Background

Michael Welton notes that building and sustaining community "runs like a green-and-red thread (green for building community, red for challenging structures of oppression)" (1993, p. 4) through the history of Canadian adult education. The Antigonish movement, Corbett's extension activities, the ***Farm Radio Forum*** and countless projects neglected by written histories were the stepping stones towards a just Canada for our exploited, pre-war working class (Kidd, 1963).

The rapid realignment of political and economic power following the Second World War–pitting beleaguered democracy against yet another totalitarian juggernaut–dealt popular adult education a blow from which it has yet to recover (Law, 1988). In retreat was commitment to social reform and global understanding. The great experiment in social transformation had failed and in its wake were Oppenheimer's mirad horrors. The 1950s and 1960s also marked the ascension of MacKenzie King's welfare state. The poor didn't starve anymore. And if they did, nobody was too interested: the Soviet threat and a gleeful frenzy of acquisition quickly consumed a generation born into poverty and fear (Faris, 1975).

For adult educators, the time had come for a split between the liberal and social democrats. In the process, mainstream adult education–that with which the

populace generally identified-shifted from a movement to a profession (Selman, 1987). Increasingly individualistic, adult education started,

> ...equating general social improvement with the satisfaction of individual goals or needs, personal well being, with individual economic and social mobility. A concept of adult education...which sees for itself a therapeutic, entertainment role offering humane, psychological adjustment to the status quo. (Law, 1988, p. 25)

But why did the liberal democratic tradition rise to the fore?

Marxist class analysis-long the catalyst of my elders' rolling eyes, frothing mouths, and nonsequituous, countrified musings-argues that capitalism does not provide a basis for economic or social justice. A neo-Marxist, Habermas formulates the fundamental contradiction of capitalism as between social production and private appropriation; that is, social production for the enhancement of particular interests (Held, 1982).

Governments in late capitalist societies predicate their legitimacy on a successful fusion of science and technology, the work horses of economic growth (Gidden, 1985). However, sustaining the inherent dysfunctions of the capitalist marketplace requires increasingly massive state intervention and this must be legitimated (Held, 1982).

> What is needed to this end is latitude for manipulation by state interventions that, at the cost of limiting the institutions of private law, secure the private form of capital utilization and bind the masses' loyalty to this form. (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1980, p. 18)

Sustaining the accumulation process requires maintaining a certain degree of loyalty. Although compliance can be secured to a limited extent by coercion, "societies claiming to operate according to the bourgeois democracy depend more on the existence of a widespread belief that the system adheres to the principles of equality, justice and freedom" (Held, 1982, p. 184). The institution of parliamentary democracy both elicits mass loyalty and avoids participation. Further, the reliance on science and technology results in an empiricism of the public consciousness: the development of capitalist societies is determined by impersonal forces of science rather than by deliberate political and economic decisions.

> Thus arises a perspective in which the development of the social system seems to be determined by the logic of scientific-technical progress. The immanent law of this progress seems to produce objective extingencies, which must be obeyed by any politics oriented towards functional needs. But when this semblance has taken root effectively, then propaganda can refer to the role of technology and science in order to explain and legitimate why, in modern societies, the process of decision-making about practical problems loses its

> function and must be replaced by plebiscitory decisions about alternative sets of leaders of administrative personnel. (Abercrombie et al., 1980, p. 19)

By depoliticizing the populace, political decisions between alternate courses of action appear to be technical solutions to agreed upon problems. Ironically, participating in these institutions (which become, in effect, the public's only way to participate in the governance of their society) legitimizes these fundamentally undemocratic institutions (Guess, 1987).

The class conflict of early capitalism–the basis of Ontario's Workers' Educational Association, St. Francis Xavier's People's School, and the University of Saskatchewan's Agricultural Societies (MacInnes, 1963)–has been replaced by compromise in late capitalism. This development involves the loss of class identity and fragmentation of consciousness (Abercrombie et al., 1980). Given the social conscience and consciousness of popular educators, how has this has happened is a fascinating study in manipulation.

The Role of Adult Education in Social Change

It is adult learning (rather than the learning of children) that is central to societal reproduction, resistance, and transformation argues Welton (1987). It is from the adult population that questioning and revolution emerge, contingent upon men's and women's abilities to learn new ways of seeing the world and acting within it.

The capitalist state has three fundamental objectives in societal and cultural reproduction:

1. Aiding in the capital accumulation process (the accumulative function).
2. Maintaining law and order (the coercive function).
3. Assisting in legitimizing the rule of the dominant class through managing the social-learning process (the knowledge legitimizing function).

So long as accumulation proceeds, the state can ignore much of whatever else might happen in society.

When the accumulation process is threatened by social instability, the state's legitimating apparatus swings into action. For example, the economic crash of 1982 jump-started government involvement in retraining the workforce (euphemistically called lifelong learning). Long a basic tenet of adult education, state-sponsored lifelong learning has taken on an increasing vocational and academic focus, redirecting lifelong learning's function to propagate the economic status quo and quell its mischievous, questioning tendencies (Selmen & Dampier, 1991).

Selman (1989) notes that continuing education was, and still is, opposed:

> ...not only when it was associated with particular political views which others reject, but also on the more general grounds that it could cause people to think more critically and perhaps seek to change their positions in life. (p. 72)

> ...the powers that be, in both university and in broader society, understood our message perfectly well-perhaps better than we did. And the message was change, a change in who has knowledge, a change in who is empowered, a change in who can play an effective part in society. Adult education faced-and faces-not just indifference, but also active resistance and hostility. (p. 69)

The causes often attached to adult education threaten societal reproduction. The outcomes of popular education are things the powerful,

> ...don't want: more effective democracy and wider participation in decision-making; a democratized workplace; more effective environmental protection; immigrants and others learning how to get their way in society; increased rights for depressed groups; or expanded roles for women. In other words, adult education thereby acquires all of the enemies these various causes attract. (Selman, 1989, p. 78)

The depoliticization of citizens extends directly to public-policy determination where elected representatives and small groups of stakeholders are the key players in policy formation (MacNeil, 1987). Minimal opportunities for public involvement means the powerless can't compete with the powerful as a part of the process. Welton (1987) argues that an imbalance in political strength naturally leads to inequitable resource distribution; the services minimally necessary to ensure capital accumulation and political legitimization are either provided or encouraged through voluntary groups. This action perpetuates inequity because the population affected remains invisible, easily manipulated and unable to have its articulated needs legitimized (Thomas, 1987).

What capitalist society defines as need is intimately linked with society's governing consumeristic orientation. To need something is to be lacking and if there is a need, the market will move to meet that need; the simple beauty of laissez faire economics (Law & Sisson, 1984). Need, then, is a social construction. Needs can be filled with some***thing***, some***thing*** we can produce.

What of those needs which don't have mass-produced solutions? What about our need to be satisfied, and loved, and enfranchised, and challenged? As we'll see, the cult of individualism has the answer to that.

The Co-opting of Adult Education

Need is now also the battle cry of mainstream adult educators. The economic crises of the last 15 years have had a devastating impact on adult-education funding: government support has evaporated and adult educators have had to seek alternate sources. Entrepreneurial adult educators have moved into the service industry while those still milking the public teat are relegated to chasing ever-shifting public funding meant to put out social brush-fires (Thomas, 1987).

Because felt needs reflect the social influence of a dominant culture (i.e., that needs can be always be filled with things and that certain activities are

worthwhile), tailoring programs around market demand is not a neutral activity. Ideas about what are socially sanctioned pursuits, necessary skills and values, and vocational qualifications all stem from needs we "have" to which the government is "responding." In fact, the very financing of programs appears to justify their provision because the government–particularly in these economically tight times–wouldn't provide something that wasn't necessary, would it?

Selman and Dampier have defined three main sub-groups of adult education; although not mutually exclusive, their typology brings the market driven tendencies of adult education into sharp relief.

1. ***Academic, credential and vocational.*** This category includes much of the work done by the formal educational systems (public and private), business and industry, professional associations, and vocational and technical education in the public and private sectors. In the neo-conservative 1980s, it has been this sector of the field which has been the predominant focus of government support.
2. ***Personal interest and development.*** This includes much of what has been termed "general interest" or "community education," and relates to hobbies and the expanding of personal skills, understanding or horizons.
3. ***Social action and social change.*** This includes various kinds of educational activities which are dedicated to active efforts to critique and change society in some way. While the public educational system is mandated to be active in type one, and on a fee-for-service basis provides some of type two, it has of late done little in this third area, and the trend is perhaps in the direction of complete withdrawal. The sponsors of activity in this third area tend to be groups and organizations whose purpose is to seek social change. (1991, p. 289-290)

Little public effort is being made to enable disadvantaged Canadians to play a fuller part in Canadian society and the tendency to centralize control over our educational institutions renders them less able to respond to community needs (Selman, 1987).

Klein's *New Directions for Adult Learning in Alberta* (Advanced Education and Career Development, 1994) falls into this pattern, dealing almost exclusively with formal education which is essentially academic and vocational in nature. Included in this October 1994 document are priorities which indicate an emphasis on self-sufficiency and reduced dependence on social-support systems.

> A key consideration in the review of each proposal (for access to government funding) will be the program's potential to provide learners with the attitudes, skills and knowledge that lead to employability and personal growth. (Advanced Education and Career Development, 1994, p. 8)

Federally, the Liberal's 1994 Green Book suggests that "more Canadians need opportunities for training and education throughout their lives-because continuous

learning is key to good jobs and security" (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994, p. 8)

The government conceptualization of education reflects the liberal-democratic view of adult education: education provides people to play a part in the existing social and economic order and adapts them to the system (Selman, 1989). Failure to prosper continues to be laid at the feet of the individual when in fact the failure is endemic for certain social groups within a capitalist economy (Selman, 1987). The liberal-democratic aspiration to create opportunities for people to better their situation reflects Canada's cultural shift towards individual responsibility.

Three models of adult education emerging from this mindset have been identified by New Zealanders Michael Law and Linda Sissons (1984); all are inherently adaptive in character. They include:

1. An upward-mobility model based on individual self-advancement needs.
2. A helping/coping model designed to directly or vicariously blunt the harsh impact of life crisis.
3. An allocatory model whereby deliberate intervention techniques are employed to equalize the resources to individuals.

Sissons and Law conclude that even when these models purport to be concerned with social change, adult educators define the individual within an adaptive framework.

Adult education literature often defines an adult as one who has accepted the social roles and functions that define adulthood. This circular definition of adulthood is predicated on a social construction of adulthood which includes the dominant idea that adults are responsible for their own success (and, consequently, their own failure).

> The psychology which underlies individualistic adult education is rooted in: ...the ideology of conformism and synchronization in the era of late capitalism. The concepts are less than critical; they are blank cheques that endorse the prevailing malpractice with cheery inner strength and self-actualizationè. Liberation is a banal existence plus enthusiasm.... The ordinary is extraordinary because it is ordinary. The alchemists of liberation transmute the base wares of capitalism into the treasures of humanity. (Law & Sissons, 1984, p. 71).

Those needs which can't be met with a shipment from the warehouse are marginalized; wanting more than purchasing power in exchange for our labors fundamentally contradicts the capitalist paradigm. Or maybe it's the labour-money exchange which fundamentally contradicts the human paradigm.

Notions of spare-time and increased leisure-time simply redefine the effects of an economic crisis. Law and Sissons note that they maintain the illusion of post-war affluence while obscuring the harsh economic reality of widespread poverty. In this

context, adult education is not only reduced to amusement, and also serves as a means of social control.

Legitimation Crises

Habermas notes that legitimization crises–the withdrawal from the existing order of the support or loyalty of the mass of the population as their motivational commitment to its normative basis is eroded–is just one of a number of crisis tendencies (Held, 1982).

Legitimation crises are not simply a loss of confidence in one government, but a rejection of the conceptual basis of western governance and the role of free markets. Rather than transferring political power to a representative, the legitimation-crisis populace revokes their sanction of representative democracy and participates directly in governing. The deterministic corruption of Hegel's dialectic–the philosophical premise justifying profit-motivated globalization–will be revealed and begin a movement toward regionalization (perhaps self-governing bioregions) based on culturally homogenous societies. The key here lies in the present tense form of verbs: legitimation crises aren't a destination but a process that is successful only if it is continuous, reflecting the abscence of an end-point in Hegel's model.

The social reforms of the 1950s temporarily validated the government's claim to legitimacy (in Habermas's theory, based on successfully managing the economy) by providing a floor for the poor which (in theory) meets their basic needs: government has bought its way out of its legitimization difficulties. However, the western economic prolapse of 1982 (exemplified by Ronald Reagan "leading" America from being the world's largest creditor to being the world's largest debtor), signaled a doubling of the number of Canadians on social assistance and overloaded an already unsustainable system. Attempting to correct that, both federal and provincial governments have opened the veins of our social-safety system. For now this is working.

A study by Gibbons and Archer (1995) about public perceptions of the Klein government's budget cuts shows that 56% of respondents approve of the government's performance although big business was seen as the primary winner. This pattern has also been repeated in Saskatchewan where Roy Romano was re-elected following massive government funding cuts. Ontario, with the defeat of Bob Ray, has also opted for a conservative, deficit-busting course.

Luke and White projected that:

> Being unable to maintain the incomes of the unemployed and underemployed through either transfer payment schemes or full employment programs, the "technologically competent" elites now in control of the informationalizing industrial state and transnational firms are promoting–in the familiar rhetoric of Yankee ingenuity, free enterprise, and self-reliance–a hybrid package of structural unemployment, volunteerism, soft-energy paths, frugality, voluntary simplicity, decentralization and local actionism to meliorate the deteriorating

> situation of the "technologically obsolescent" and "technologically superfluous" classes. (1985, p. 34)

Eleven years later, this very trend is emerging strongly in Canada. Heralded by society's knowledge-legitimization apparatus, we see a proliferation of volunteer programs, simplify-your-life books, and media emphasis on self-fulfillment through nontraditional routes such as physical fitness, self-actualization and spiritual re-awakening. Although good in themselves, these trends only mask the failure of capitalism to provide equal economic opportunities; is there any doubt that the rich also engage in physical fitness, self-actualization, and spiritual re-awakening? The only difference is that they do so with the assistance of piles of cash. By breaking down outer-directed consumeristic dependencies in the mass population on national industrial capital and the welfare state, political and economic leaders are able to maximize accumulation (Luke & White, 1985).

However popular these provincial leaders are now, their dismantling of state-supported social systems should promptly end this. Aggravated by current and anticipated federal cuts to funding, the dual effect of "right-sizing" the public service will increase the number of unemployed and decrease the social programs available. At the same time, taxes and user fees will stay the same or increase.

Incomes have dropped to their lowest real dollar-value since 1976 (the first year statistics were kept); median employment income rose by 7.5% between 1989 and 1993–the years of the recession–but once adjusted for the rising cost of living, the purchasing power of that income plunged by 6.1% (Calgary Herald, 1994). Unemployment is constant in the 10% range, however 13% of the unemployed were unemployed for a year or more, which is three times the 1976 level. Further, almost 40% of those who claimed Unemployment Insurance Benefits (UIB) have claimed UIB at least three times in the last five years.

The plant closures and layoffs in central Canada after the Canada–U.S. free-trade agreement were only the beginning (Luke & White, 1985). Manufacturing will increasingly head south as a result of the North American Free Trade Atreement (NAFTA) (it's cheaper to produce things in Mexico). As my friend Alex recently ranted: "Globalization doesn't mean we're all suddenly on the same team. It just means that rich people can now exploit poor people all over the world much more efficiently."

From the perspective of the average, middle-class Canadian, the government won't be managing the economy well. If we accept that a significant part of Canada's high-standard of living comes from our social safety net, what will the result of removing it be? All we need to do is look south, at the plight of the poor in the United States; isn't the class stratification and brewing social revolt more than a little reminiscent of Canada in the early part of this century?

But social-program down-sizing won't necessarily result in revolution. While the demands on the systems legitimizing our government's inequitable base may

outstrip its ability to deliver the goods (thus creating a crisis), change isn't imperative. The very structure of our society is stacked such that a crisis would have great difficulty precipitating any sort of concerted rejection of our social framework.

Disturbance endangers society's existence only if the normative social structures are impaired to the point of social anomie (Held, 1982). This presupposes that at one time, a coherent and universal motivation existed for participation which forms the basis of a societal (or class) judgment that the state has breached the social contract. However, the fragmentation of late-capitalist society (the atomization of people's experiences) impairs the coherence of views of exploitation. Compliance is thus better than noncompliance which can only be framed as provoking the rightful wrath of the system for disobedience.

The pseudo-gratifications of the cultural industry serve to further distract and divert attention from impending legitimacy crises. Finally, a preoccupation with our own lot, the fulfillment of our own needs–the contraction of generosity and caring we can observe in our society–is both a product and an adaptive response to contemporary society.

Conclusion: The Return of Popular Adult Education

Popular adult education both allows the working (and middle) class to articulate its own needs and complaints and see the causal, underlying structures. By inducing self-reflection, Habermas's critical theory brings "the populace to realize that the coercion from which they suffer is self-imposed, thereby dissolving the power or objectivity of the coercion and bringing them to a state of greater freedom and knowledge of their true interests" (Guess, 1987, p. 70). Similar to Freirian conscientization in approach, popular education will again be a high-demand commodity.

However, the key weakness of Freire's theory is the assumption that knowledge will lead to action and that the only reason people accept a repressive social institution is that it is legitimized by their ideological world picture. Powerful social forces keep practices and institutions in existence despite widespread illegitimacy.

Abandoning the idea that adult educators can ever win a pitched battle against the powerful political-economic-religious coalition is the key to bringing about change. The capitalist machine excels at quickly sorting the winners from the losers. It is the dualistic structure that makes the dominant culture vulnerable; we can lose, but how we lose is entirely up to us and the cost we can exact for our perpetual defeat is constant social honesty and grassroots criticism.

But is this any different than endorsing "the prevailing malpractice with cheery inner strength...?" The answer is yes. It's different because it isn't endorsing the prevailing culture, but actively opposing it and developing the skills in the oppressed such that they can develop alternatives to the dominant structures which

accurately meet their needs. The long-term (and possibly endless) nature of changing social norms–how we construct need, whether or not we internalize our failures, etc.–works against capitalism, which will only divert resources from the accumulative process to deal with us if we pose an immediate threat. It is in the fragmented social picture of late capitalist society that we will hide and work towards an empowered populace.

And it is the sentiment of early adult education movements–that of continuous improvement–that will form the basis of contemporary adult education. This is not the continuous improvement of management how-to books (a utopic approach based on maximizing profit), but rather continuous improvement based on the idea that social codification does not serve the best interests of an inherently dynamic population. Advocacy education (a modern form of the *Farm Radio Forum*) is the medium through which the changing needs, values, and solutions to social problems will be articulated. And the tool-kit approach of the Antigonish movement–developing literacy, numeracy and technolacy–will create the self-management skills necessary for participatory governance.

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