

ADULT EDUCATION AND SOCIALIST PEDAGOGY

Frank Youngman

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Adult education in most countries and at most times has been dominated by 'left of centre' approaches. But critical analyses of the ideological orientations of adult education in the contemporary international context have been rare. If adult education with any 'social purpose' ethic is to survive, a re-examination of the *purposes* of adult education is essential.

Frank Youngman's book attempts to cover a major aspect of these concerns—the Marxist approach to adult education. (As the book is exclusively concerned with Marxism—rather than socialism—as the reference point, should this not have been reflected in the title?) There are many good things in this book and it will be of immense value to those engaged in both the theory and practice of adult education. It is a scholarly and rigorous study, making use of a wide range of sources; and it is written clearly and without 'mystification'. The sustained analysis of Freire is valuable for its clarity and conciseness, but above all for highlighting the fundamental differences between Freirean and Marxist views of adult education. The chapter on socialist pedagogy is, again, clearly argued and follows logically from the preceding analyses—though its recommendations are hardly startling. There is, finally, a useful summary of orthodox approaches to adult learning—behaviourist, humanistic, cognitive, and eclectic—and the Marxist critiques of them.

These are significant achievements, and fill a much needed gap in the literature. There are, though, substantial problems with Youngman's approach. On a fairly prosaic level, I question the large amount of space given to a delineation of general Marxist theory—and the very brief attention paid to adult education in practice via three case studies. (The general discussion of Marxism occupies well over one-third of the text, but the case studies just over twenty of the 272 pages.) The account of Marxist theory is generally competent, but adds little if anything to our existing understanding, and is focussed only intermittently on *adult education* concerns. More fundamentally, given the subject matter of this book, Youngman is ambivalent in his analysis of the 'base/superstructure' aspect of Marxism. In the end, he seems to come down in favour of Williams' humanistic, neo-Marxist view: but this in itself can be argued to be ambivalent, and Youngman presents no *critical* discussion of the issue. And his 'libertarian' position here co-exists somewhat uneasily with his general orientation, which tends towards support for the more 'deterministic' view of Marxism.

The ambivalence, of course, is not exclusive to Youngman: it has pervaded Marxism itself throughout its existence. But Youngman's failure to draw attention to this and other problems in Marxist analysis is indicative of the most serious criticism I have of his study: it is descriptive, and uncritical of its focal points of attention—Marxism, and Marxist approaches to adult education. Thus, to take two examples, Youngman is

wholly uncritical of Marxian socialism's demonstrable failures to produce, anywhere as yet, free and democratic political and social structures. And, secondly, he does not raise any of the obvious problems of an exclusively Marxist model of adult education in terms of the in-built tendencies towards authoritarian, unilinear, and intellectually static and unchallenging approaches which are implied. Other equally central illustrations of this uncritical approach abound. But the main point here is clear: whilst Marxism may have the 'answers' to such criticisms (though I am sceptical, personally), these issues need to be debated and analysed. Throughout, a Marxist model is *asserted*, and justified neither intellectually nor politically. And, despite its rigour, the model presented is essentially simplistic. No differentiation is made, for example, between the effects of capitalism's operation in Western as opposed to Third World countries, in terms of educational structures and priorities. No real consideration is given to the markedly differing schools of Marxism in the twentieth century (there is no mention of Trotskyism at all) and the implications for differing attitudes towards adult education theory and practice that these might entail. And surprisingly scant attention is paid to those who have espoused non-Marxist, in Youngman's terms, but socialist approaches to adult education. (There is, for example, no discussion of the links and dissonances between 'radical liberal' and 'socialist' approaches to adult education, save in one extended footnote.)

Nevertheless, and despite these substantial criticisms, this is an invaluable book. It is provocative, informative and stimulating. And it is, in these gloomy times, refreshingly positive and optimistic: a good antidote to the philistine and 'market-oriented' ethos of much contemporary debate in the post-school sector.

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