Reconstituting the Agora: Towards an Alternative Politics of Lifelong Learning

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**Abstract:** The paper proposes an explicit politicisation of the idea of lifelong learning as learning for democracy – as distinct from the dominant but implicit account of it as learning to labour. This requires that adult education as an agent of lifelong learning reoccupies the political and curricular space in which citizens make democracy work.

**Introduction**

When governments become interested in lifelong learning, it is as well to be cautious; when they add active citizenship and social inclusion to the list, it may be time to be positively sceptical – not to say suspicious. How do we cope with this sudden official enthusiasm for causes we have long espoused?

The argument of this paper is that the current discourse of lifelong learning is a highly politicised discourse. Its politics, however, is a silent, unspoken politics. In the first part of the paper, this tacit politics of the dominant discourse of lifelong learning is exposed and examined in terms of the constructions of citizenship implicit within it. These are shown to be narrowly individualistic, instrumental and reductionist. In New Labour's Britain, at any rate, the economism of Thatcherism (which makes Marx seem positively humanistic!) remains unchallenged - and largely unremarked. It has become truly hegemonic in the sense that, as we enter the new millennium, it constitutes the common sense of the era: we work within its discursive blinkers with less and less awareness of how they reduce our sense of the possibilities and potential of our work.

**Adult Education, Lifelong Learning and the Discourses of Citizenship**

Two discourses of citizenship dominate current adult education policy and practice. Both are fundamentally economistic in the sense that they posit at the centre of our conception of lifelong learning the idea that human beings are essentially economic animals – creatures of the cash nexus. The first discourse constructs the adult learner as worker or producer. Education is the engine of economic competitiveness in the global market; unemployment and the skills gap are the consequence of not getting this right. Adult education is reduced to training for work: preparing people for their roles in production, wealth creation and profit (mainly other people's, of course) – whether or not any real jobs exist, the point being that where there is no work, the discipline of the work ethic must, nevertheless, be maintained (see Forester, 1999). It is this somewhat blinkered, supply-side view of what lifelong learning means that has tended to predominate in recent policy initiatives and led to it being experienced by many as a process of social control (Cofield, 1999). The second discourse of citizenship constructs the adult learner as consumer or customer. In this case, adult education is reduced to a demand-side commodity which may be bought and sold in the market place – just like any other commodity. As one of Mrs Thatcher's senior officials once put it, echoing her famous aphorism: 'There is no such thing as adult education – only adults in classes'. And so adult education is reduced, at a stroke, to a market transaction.

It is not, of course, that these economistic discourses do not matter – self-evidently, they do. Rather, it is that they simply do not account for enough of what adult education, let alone lifelong learning, should be about. As educators, we are not just servicers of the economy or traders in the educational marketplace. On the contrary, our real interest lies in enabling people to develop to their full potential as 'whole persons' or rounded human beings. This suggests that adult education should help people to engage in a wide range of political roles and social relationships which occur outside both the workplace and the marketplace. It is this more holistic and civic sense of what it means to be human to which the radical and social purpose traditions in adult education have always spoken – with clarity and conviction. And if we are seriously interested in reconnecting lifelong learning with...
tive citizenship and social inclusion, it is this tradition of adult education and adult learning which we must seek to revive – and to cherish.

This tradition embodies a quite different discourse of citizenship, in which the adult learner is treated as a political agent and social actor. Indeed, it can be said that what Keith Jackson (1995) calls the “adult education of engagement” originated in the struggles of ordinary people to make their own claim to citizenship and to be included in democracy. In a very real sense, they actively and collectively asserted their citizenship as a social practice within the politics of civil society in order to claim the rights of citizenship within the politics of the state. In other words, they made democracy work. This was as much an educational task as a political purpose. What is now required is to renegotiate and reoccupy the educational space in which this historic struggle took place - essentially, the creative space between the personal and the political dimensions of our lives, between difference and solidarity (see Johnston, 1999). And, in the process, we must be prepared to learn how to do this from feminist theory and practice as well as the experience of other progressive social movements. These movements can help us in reclaiming common purpose because they show us that citizenship is an active cultural process as well as a political procedure and they remind us that democracy is a way of life as well as a set of institutions.

In the adult education of social and political engagement students come to the educational encounter as “knowing subjects” who, as citizens, have a particular, equal and indivisible political status. The curriculum is constructed, partly at least, from the intellectual and personal resources as well as the social and political interests they bring with them. They are social actors – not empty vessels, deficit systems, bundles of need or, indeed, primarily producers or consumers. Moreover, their educational interests and aspirations are shared and collective. This is the starting point because it is what they have in common as citizens (although more individual and idiosyncratic patterns of personal development may well follow). Learning is essentially about making knowledge which makes sense of their world and helps them to act upon it, collectively, in order to change it for the better. As such, groups of students in this kind of adult education may be properly said to constitute “epistemological communities” (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, adult learning grows in and out of such communities, or social movements, as they exist in the “real world” struggling and striving outside the walls of the classroom and the gates of the academy. Adult education’s relationship to these movements is a symbiotic one (Welton, 1995).

This kind of “rooted” adult education exists in most popular histories and cultures – in both the rich world and the poor world, North and South. And yet in many so-called “developed” – and now “post-industrial” – societies it seems to have all but disappeared. Moreover, as we move from the allegedly bounded, modernist “field of adult education” to the supposedly open, postmodern “moorland of adult learning” (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997), so, it seems, has the adult educator. Why is this? Does it matter?

**Research: Asking the Wrong Questions**

What most conspicuously marks off the present-day thought of the knowledge classes is its self-referentiality . . . and the increasingly uncommitted stance it takes towards other sectors of society . . . (Bauman, 1999, p. 129)

In pursuing the radical project in adult education today, we confront a variety of difficulties, obstacles and contradictions. These inhere in what is increasingly – and, in the context of globalisation, pervasively – expected of us as adult educators (eg see Walters, 1997). The danger is that as they do their work in us, so we come to discipline ourselves within the terms of an alien and alienating discourse. We become, in short, the agents of our own surveillance and self-censorship. I would point to eight particular trends in current adult education policy, theory and practice which have the effect of de-radicalising our work and divorcing it from popular struggles (Martin, 1999):

1. We are increasingly exposed - and expected to conform - to the hegemony of technical rationality and narrowly conceived and economistic forms of vocationalism and competence.

2. To a greater or lesser extent, we are forced to operate in an educational market place in which knowledge becomes commodified and credentialised and educational institutions and agencies exist in relationships of competition rather than cooperation or collaboration with one another.

3. This market place - and, in particular, its
workers - are subjected to the rigours of the new managerialism, enforcing an accountant's view of the world in which we seem to know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

4. The construction of the “self-directed learner” as consumer or customer puts the emphasis on the non-directive “facilitation” of individual and individualised learning - as distinct from purposeful educational intervention (and our own agency as educators).

5. There is a growing and seductive tendency to celebrate the authenticity of personal experience rather than test its social and educational significance.

6. The “postmodern turn” in the current theory of much European and North American adult education seems all too often to cut if off from its historical roots in social purpose, political engagement and the vision of a better world.

7. Rhetorical assertions about the importance of “active citizenship” and “social capital” in the “learning society” take little or no account of the material realities of context, contingency and differentials of power.

8. Despite its undoubted potential, the growing enthusiasm for information technology as the medium of instruction in adult education/learning raises crucial, if widely neglected, questions about the authority of the text, the privatisation of knowledge, the control of learning and the autonomy of the learner.

To sum up in the language of the radical tradition in British adult education, we are in danger of becoming the compliant purveyors of “merely useful knowledge” (i.e., knowledge that is constructed to make people productive, profitable and quiescent workers) as distinct from the active agents of “really useful knowledge” (knowledge that is calculated to enable people to become critical, autonomous and – if necessary – dissenting citizens) (see Johnson, 1979).

**Learning Democracy: Reconstituting the Agora**

So what is to be done? This paper advocates an alternative and explicit politicisation of lifelong learning as learning for democracy. This is predicated upon a renewed historical understanding and consciousness of adult education’s role as an agent of social justice and as a crucial resource in the struggles of ordinary people for a fuller sense of democratic and inclusive citizenship. To what extent does this project, conceived as an integral part of a wider international struggle for democracy as a way of life, herald the possibility of an alternative “globalisation from below”?

The continuing evidence of the so-called “democratic deficit” and what Ralph Miliband (1994) has termed the “hegemony of resignation” suggests that we need, in Bauman’s words, to “re-invent politics.” Essentially, what is missing in our lives today is the opportunity to meet as citizens and, once again, make democracy work. The point I want to emphasise is that historically the kind of adult education in which citizens met together to talk and learn and argued helped to fill precisely this space - and to make it a uniquely democratic and creative space. Indeed, it could be said that in a very real way adult learning, often autonomous and self-directed, constituted this space (see Simon, 1965).

In order to begin to develop the intellectual and conceptual resources required for such a project, what is now required is a retheorisation of radical adult education in terms of learning that takes place in the intermediate space between the private lives of individuals and their public lives as citizens. This is where people must learn, once again, to meet to argue through and argue out what it means to be active citizens in a democratic society. It is the level of social reality at which, in the words of the great (now sadly neglected) American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1970), the “personal troubles of milieu” meet and mix with the “public issues of structure” – or, in Habermasian terms, the “life-world” confronts the “systems world.” This has always been the distinctive curricular and pedagogical terrain of the “adult education of engagement,” and yet it has all but disappeared – squeezed in the vice of possessive individualism, on the one hand, and the globalised power of transnational corporations, on the other. It must now be reclaimed. This is necessarily at once an educational task, an intellectual challenge and a political purpose. As Peter Alheit (1999) has recently argued, there is an urgent need to develop “meso level” theory in adult education in order to connect our work with the increasingly complex and fractured reality of contemporary individual and social experience. In my view, this task requires both an unapologetically modernist account of the underlying interests and forces at work within the so-called New World Order coupled with a “postmodern” sensibility as to how the effects of globalisation and
cultural change are unevenly inscribed in people's day-to-day experience.

In thinking about this, I have found the work of Zygmunt Bauman particularly helpful and suggestive. Towards the end of his most recent book, *In Search of Politics* (Bauman, 1999), he argues (in one heroic sentence!) that:

The endemic instability of the life-worlds of the overwhelming majority of contemporary men and women is the ultimate cause of the present-day crisis of the republic – and so of the fading and wilting of the 'good society' as a purpose and motive of collective action in general and resistance against the progressive erosion of the private/public space, the sole space where human solidarities and the recognition of common causes may sprout and come to fruition. (p. 180)

At the beginning of the book, Bauman asks: "But what is there to know?" about the contemporary world and the human condition. His answer is, in short, that "the growth of individual freedom may coincide with the growth of collective impotence" (p. 2). This is largely because we have lost the political "art of translation" between our private lives as individuals and our public lives as citizens of the republic. Consequently, however widespread and shared our personal experiences and anxieties, we lack the communal means to "condense" these into "common causes."

What this existential crises of late modernity requires of us is that we "seek collectively managed levers powerful enough to lift individuals from their privately suffered misery" (p. 3) to conceive and grasp, once again, a mutually negotiated and agreed apprehension of the "common weal" and the "good society" (as distinct from merely the "good life"). This means, in essence, determinedly countering the logic of market liberalism which is to render politics insignificant and to reduce citizenship to mere consumption and choice. The task therefore is, indeed, to re-invent politics.

Bauman's book is not about education (although the idea of the seeds of democracy sprouting and bearing fruit certainly evokes a process of learning), but his argument does present what seems to me to be a fundamental challenge to educators today, especially those of us who choose to pin our colours to the mast of "lifelong learning". If this somewhat vacuous term is to mean anything that really matters, it must be about *learning for living* as distinct from merely *learning for a living* - or, at any rate, it must be understood in existential as well as instrumental terms. On this view, the central task on the lifelong learning agenda should be to confront what Bauman identifies as the worm at the heart of democratic life in the rich societies of today: "the trouble with our civilization is that it stopped questioning itself" (pp. 6-7). Consequently:

The art of reforging private troubles into public issues is in danger of falling into disuse and being forgotten; private troubles tend to be defined in a way that renders exceedingly difficult their "agglomeration," and thus their condensation into a political force. (p. 7)

Here, then, is the central educational task within a socially progressive and politically purposive interpretation of lifelong learning: to act as the agent of an alternative politics of lifelong learning to the dismal litanies of possessive individualism, instrumental rationality and the new managerialism. Lifelong learning for democracy must help to "bind the solitary (and frightened) beings into a *solidary* (and confident) community" (p. 7).

This sounds very different from the limited (and limiting) orthodoxies of the mainstream debate about lifelong learning today. In fact, what it involves is, essentially, a rediscovery of the roots of popular adult education and a rehistoricisation of contemporary struggles. The adult education of the social purpose tradition has always acted as an agent of what C. Wright Mills termed the "sociological imagination" and - by showing ordinary people how to "translate between" the private and public spheres of their experience (as well as *vice versa*) - of their emergent political aspiration and consciousness. In a sense, this kind of adult education - and I would emphasise that it is essential to restore the agency of the educator within the lifelong learning paradigm - is a necessary corrective to the emphasis in modern political theory on the separation of the private and public domains. What matters, according to Bauman, is "the link, the mutual dependency, the communication between the two domains" (p. 86). Democratic politics requires that what we are accustomed to see as a boundary should become an "interface," ie where crossing over and back between the two domains is made
This re-invention of politics is predicated upon a re-excavation of the dialectical space of civil society, the *agora* of the Greek *polis*, between the private world of the household (*oikos*) and the public world of the state (*ecclesia*). This is the critical and creative space in which citizens meet to make democracy work. It is important, however, to note that it is not a separate, intermediate domain, Rather, it is an educational and cultural space in the lives of citizens which is constituted by their political activity as citizens. Historically, the *agora*, has been invaded, colonised and destroyed by totalitarianism and other forms of state tyranny; today, however, in the “there is no alternative” era of the New World Order and globalisation the danger is that the democratic state simply abandons this space, letting it lapse into a “no-man’s-land . . . left vacant for any adventurer eager to invade” (p 97). Rebuilding the *agora* is as much an educational task as a democratic purpose (eg see Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 1999). It is also the essential precondition for contesting the logic of globalisation, the effects of which are the “progressive separation of power from politics” and the instantiation in all our lives of the “political economy of uncertainty.”

There is a crisis in Western democracy, but the etymology of “crisis,” as Bauman points out, suggests that it means a time for decisions rather than a time of catastrophe. If we care about democracy, we need, once again, to *learn to learn together* and decide together as citizens. We also need to find new ways of making our world make sense. As Bauman puts it, “we search for theory when things previously at our fingertips get out of hand” (p. 142). Adult education as an agent of lifelong learning can make a distinctive contribution to this task. But first we must become more critical and reflexive about ourselves and our work: recognising, for example, the elisions and evasions of a woolly humanism, the reductionism of over-determined radicalisms, and the ludic temporising of much postmodern theorising.

The adult education of social purpose and political engagement has always occupied this intermediate - and often precarious – space between the state and civil society, engaging with the collective experience of its students and turning it to social and political action. In this way, it has been a vital instrument in the struggle to extend democracy, mediating the relationship between the liberal tradition of citizenship as an ascribed, individual status and the civic republican tradition of citizenship as a collectively asserted social practice (see Lister, 1998). This is the space that a repoliticised adult education practice now needs to reoccupy in order to stimulate and support lifelong learning for a more active and inclusive construction of citizenship. In short, what we have to do is put the adult back into adult education and lifelong learning.

**Conclusion**

Adult education as an agent of lifelong learning has a crucial part to play in articulating each of the three discourses of citizenship outline above, *and the balance between them*. In order to make the connections between lifelong learning, democracy and citizenship we must recognise that people *learn to be* active citizens in a democratic society - and, moreover, to recognise that their capacity for learning and changing has always been the key resource for making democracy a way of life. This is no panacea for the social, economic and political ills and inequalities of late modernity, but it is one way of beginning to get to grips with some of them.

Historically, the radical tradition locates adult education as an integral part of progressive social movements: part of the common cause of liberation, the advancement of collective interests and the political project to create a more just and egalitarian social order. It is at once an educational philosophy, an intellectual commitment and a political position. What Raymond Williams (1961), that great British adult educator and lifelong learner, called “the long revolution” to make, and re-make, the connections between learning and earning and living in a democracy continues. We now need to reconstitute the *agora* by stretching the discourse of citizenship implicit within the current policy agenda for lifelong learning in order to make our work, once again, part of that unfinished revolution.

**References**


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