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Beyond Coady: Adult Education and the End of Utopian Modernism

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Any biographer faces enormous tasks in crafting another's life. It is always difficult to disentangle one's own beliefs, values, doubts and desires from those one is writing about. But the biographer of Moses Michael Coady, born in 1882 into a large Irish Catholic family in a peripheral region of Canada, the Margaree Valley of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, confronts another vexing problem. When Coady died in 1959 at age 77, he was carried to his grave on the hill overlooking Antigonish by two fishermen, two farmers, a miner and a steelworker. Many newspapers noted that he had been a big man, in every way. Coady was a big man, close to 6'4" and carrying 240 pounds, an imposing and disturbing presence in the community halls and government conference rooms of feudalistic Nova Scotia through the 1930s to the mid-1950s. Yet, size and the scent of danger were not the only huge features about this complex and contrary man. To this day, the name of Coady is linked with heroism, of feats of exceeding magnitude. In Canadian adult education folklore, Coady's name is stamped indelibly with emancipatory longing and exemplary pedagogical practices. If one were to believe the myths, Coady rose suddenly like a colossus out of a small, obscure place to lead the suffering Maritimes and oppressed of the earth to the promised land of economic liberation and plenitude. Today, at the dawn of a new millennium, Coady's dream of the co-operative kingdom has proved to be an illusion. The Atlantic Canada fishery is in acute crisis, our forests mismanaged, our coal and steel industry in utter chaos and shambles. One can visit the little fishing villages of Nova Scotia, some the scene of the great co-operative tours of the late 1930s, and scarcely tell which village was the model of economic self-help and social dynamism. There are still many signs of co-operative enterprise, but they chug along more or less like every other economic venture. Nova Scotia is the graveyard of utopias, the land of excessive expectations, dashed hopes and unfulfilled longings.

From 1930 until his death, Moses Coady was at the epicentre of a remarkable awakening of primary

producers and household workers. This movement to break the stranglehold of feudal economic and political structures on the minds and outlook of impoverished Maritimers, anchored in eastern Nova Scotia, spread throughout the Maritimes and Atlantic Canada, at first like wildfire, linked with co-operative movement in every other part of Canada, New England and the mid-west USA, spreading from there into the Caribbean, Latin America and other parts of the world. From the early to late 1930s for an evanescent moment, this movement for a people's economy, named the "Antigonish Movement," caught the imagination of the world. Journalists, liberal-minded religious leaders, papal authorities, eastern seaboard intellectuals, theologians, professors, social reformers, politicians, poets, co-operative leaders and curious youth....they came from far and wide to witness the "miracle of Antigonish." Antigonish glowed with a radiant light. It clearly became not just an interesting movement worth attending to and learning something from; it was an imaginative space, a place into which people with varying interests could project their own desires, fantasies and longings. Many people, spiritually dislocated and bewildered by the scale and scope of change in the post-world war I era, desperately wanted Moses Michael Coady to be their modern Moses who could fashion a non-violent alternative to fascism and communism. They wanted Antigonish to be their Bethlehem and the co-operative self-help movement their promised land.

Movement publicists were under constant pressure to represent the movement in positive, upbeat language, images and stories. The desires of the public for concrete solutions and hope converged happily with the movement's leaders own desire for an emancipated Maritimes. Coady believed in the co-operative revolution with a terrible and fanatical belief. He, too, constantly foregrounded its successes, fueling the myth of the "modern miracle" and pushing himself on to very dangerous territory. He came to actually believe that he had been, in fact, chosen by God to teach the entire world his divine blueprint for the "good and abundant life."

People who knew Moses Coady, who would playfully characterize himself at times as “little Mosie from the Margaree,” often remarked on the genial and humble nature of this big, rough farm boy. But anyone who reads the voluminous correspondence and attends carefully to the endless speeches and writings of Moses Coady cannot help being struck by the rather ungenial and unhumble nature of his vision of the world. The biographer of Moses Coady must dispel the soft glow of the halo around this complex and very human person, and then resist the temptation to slide into post-modern cynicism about the way big power always checkmates us in the end. As historian, biographers must tell the truth as they see it, come what may, and this means placing the person in time and place. And Moses Michael Coady’s place is smack in the heart of the first five decades of the horrific 20th century. As always, there are lessons here and these are not easy to digest for those committed to emancipatory learning and action.

In this paper I want to query the “Coady legacy,” probing Moses Coady’s outlook and practice for contradictions. I want to ask the question of what we don’t want to take from Coady into the 21st century. Coady, I argue, possessed a flawed vision of the world and this world outlook bears the marks of the utopian modernist impulses of the first five decades of the 20th century. Coady, I also argue, fell prey to hubris, and this “arrogance towards the gods” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990, p. 574) led inevitably to his nemesis, the revelation of the illusionary nature of his divine blueprint for the masses of the earth.

“Passion for Grandiose Schemes”

Coady, this rural farm boy from the Margaree, who only started attending school regularly in his early teens, was a late bloomer. He was 46 when he erupted like a volcano on the Nova Scotia scene to lead the St. Francis Xavier University Extension Department on to the world stage. Once erupted, this vesuvious of a man never stopped thinking or writing about “world revolution.” Donning the prophetic mantle in the early 1930s, Coady crafted his message of redemption for Maritimers who were, yet again, living through hard times. In meeting hall after meeting hall, Coady told his depression audience that although the Maritimes were “fields of lost opportunities,” there were still opportunities that “were not being taken advantage of.” But to

take advantage, the “mind had to be educated.” It was only “through study and education that a people could see and seize the opportunities that would be profitable...” (Scrapbooks, 1931, speech to New Glasgow Rotary Club). Coady valued deeply the possibility hunting mind, and nobody worked harder to arouse Nova Scotians and Maritimers from their slumber. By 1934, enough activity was mushrooming in eastern Nova Scotia to render Coady’s message plausible. The anxiety and fearfulness of the early struggling days appeared to be over. The Extension Department’s fragile survival time had ended and new energy and enthusiasm flowed through the communities like an electrical current. *The Xavier Weekly*, February 18, 1933, had exuded: “A new life is springing up in our province. People recognize the necessity of awakening. Consequently, they are beginning to do their own thinking and, having the courage of their convictions, they act accordingly. Cooperative ideas are abroad.”

It didn’t take long for the modestly consequential accomplishments of the St. Francis Xavier Extension Department to turn into something more—the “miracle of Antigonish.” The spawn of the Extension’s herculean efforts, with limited staff and resources, to defeat the giant of feudalism capitalism, were a significant array of co-operative institutions in Atlantic Canada and other parts of North America and the world. Coady was widely hailed as the heroic leader of the non-revolutionary alternative to fascism and communism. But Coady, for reasons that remain hidden from us, crossed over the line from running an innovative Extension Department to imagining that the Antigonish Movement was the solution to the world’s problems. By the early 1940s, Coady believed that he had discovered the blueprint, that he had the “democratic formula” to solve most of the problems of the earth’s impoverished masses. Coady never had enough evidence from his experience in the Maritime co-operative movement in the 1940s and 1950s to assume that he had, indeed, found the blueprint for life on earth. In fact, the Antigonish Movement had been cut off from the grassroots at the outbreak of World War II. During the 1940s desperate co-operative leaders tried to organize federated structures to maintain the co-operative movement’s presence against an awakening capitalism. Most of the educational attention in the war and its aftermath was focused on training elite managers for the co-operative institu-

tions. Evidence from co-operative reports of the 1940s indicates clearly that the common people were not participating very much in the life of their institutions. By the early 1950s, the co-operative movement's energy had dissipated, its emancipatory potential exhausted. In his dying days, Coady imagined that the Eastern Co-operative Services, formed in 1957 to unify co-operative services, was the capstone of the movement, the guarantee of its permanence. By 1965 it had collapsed. The old, dying Coady ended up scarred in body and soul, angry at his own people for betraying the co-operative utopia, calling the Church to impossible acts of dedication and effort and railing at the darkness of the world on the edge of domination by that "hideous thing," communism.

Coady's agonal last few years reflect, I think, a profound state of hubris. No one can be certain how Coady deceived himself into thinking that he had a divine mission to liberate the people's of the world. But we can trace some of the streams that flowed into the making of Coady's millenarianism. Coady's theology was a kind of everyman's Thomism. St. Thomas, the "Common Doctor" of the Roman Church, believed that God, nature and humankind were knowable through reason and revelation. Coady tended to make up his own theology as he went along, hinging his ideas loosely to Catholic teachings. From Thomas, whose thinking was deeply influenced by Aristotle, Coady took the idea that God had revealed his blueprint for knowing God through the sacred text and his blueprint for ordering the economic, social, cultural and political world. There was only one true, or best, way of knowing God and ordering the world. In other words, Coady saw himself as God's architect of the new economic and social order. The correct formula for organizing the economy, for example, existed in the divine plan. Through scientific knowledge humankind could know the correct formula. The blueprint could be worked out by expert social architects and applied to the masses to develop their "social intelligence." In a letter expressing typical sentiments written to his buddy, Father Michael Gillis, Coady explained that all we could do in life, was "apply with persistent and unfaltering effort the right democratic formula. It matters not how slow it is or how great the difficulties in the way, that will ultimately win. There is nothing worth copying from the communists, but their persistent zeal should make us ashamed of ourselves...(L)et us nose our ship in the

wind and sail it to the bitter end. We will win in proportion to our faith" (Coady to Gillis, December 20, 1950).

This assumption is the linchpin in Coady's meaning perspective. Coady's theological certainty that he could discover an economic order that had transcendental approval placed huge burdens on him. It is important to recognize two fascinating things. First, Coady's theological dogmatism converges with modernist assumptions about the role of the intellectual. Modernist intellectuals were, in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, legislators and not interpreters. The modernist intellectual is a creature of the Enlightenment, legislated by reason to announce the one best way for humankind. Coady's Thomist beliefs made it easy for him to advocate a scientific formula for solving economic and social problems. Second, once Coady believed that he had a divinely appointed mission to legislate the one best way, viz. the co-operative way, he was now faced with a huge contradiction. He wanted the little people of the earth to be "masters of their own destiny." But Coady already knew, before they did, what their destiny ought to be. To be sure, this terrible belief fired the volcanic Coady to superhuman efforts on behalf of the economic emancipation of the exploited primary producers. But it was Coady himself, and not God, who imposed his view that the "so-called common people, by virtue of their numbers, have a messianic role to play in this drama of progress. They will kill us with their ignorance or save us by their enlightenment" ("Can Achieve High Destiny in Maritimes," *Halifax Herald*, January 1, 1941). The common people, within Coady's world outlook, were instruments for the fulfillment of God's revealed plan for humankind. But it was Coady himself, and not God, who laid this immense burden of historical necessity upon the common people.

It is also fascinating to consider that the prevalent ethos of the first five decades of the 20th century was an ethos of the grandiose dream of remaking humankind according to some law of historical necessity. The three greater shapers of the 20th century – Lenin, Stalin and Hitler – all propagated views of secular liberation that were anchored in the illusion that history was leading inexorably in a particular direction and that acts of will could ensure that it got there. Historical events during World War I and its aftermath created an electrifying apocalyptic atmosphere. The Bolshevik Revolution

promised the world a journey to a secular paradise; Hitler's revolution a thousand year reign. In an obscure backwater of North America, a priest named Moses Coady imagined that the co-operative revolution could compete on the world scene with these totalizing ideologies. Coady desired the co-operative movement to be so permanently fixed in the world that he imagined that those who built "sound co-operatives" could "feel that if they should come back 5,000 or 10,000 years from now they would still find their co-operatives in a flourishing condition" ("People in Business," Minnesota Association of Co-operatives, St. Paul, Minn., 1946). This wild dream of a permanent millennial order inhabited his religious outlook on time and space. Yet, on the underside of this dream of permanence lies deep anxiety that the world will actually turn out to be chaotic, unpredictable and exploitative of God's little people of the earth.

I believe that Coady's belief that divine reason had revealed the blueprint for the remaking of humankind converged with the prevalent, illusionary ethos of the early to mid-20th century redemptive dreams. The first half of the 20th century was not a modest time. The men who dominated this part of the century dreamed big and had little compunction about imagining that they could remake the entire world in their image, no matter what cost. Lenin, Hitler and Stalin exemplified this terrible vision. This was the ethos of a strangely violent and abstract age, and Moses Michael Coady shared in this ethos of the grand, sweeping reconstruction of the social order. Perhaps this was a manifestation of an atavistic "Catholic triumphalism," the Roman Church's age-old dream of universal domination. Coady wanted a different world from the tyrants; but he still wanted his vision of the "good and abundant life" imposed on a pandemonious world. Utopian modernism ruled the 20th century: a potent, dangerous ideology of the will to control in the service of historical (or divine) necessity.

Terrible Belief and Dark Impulses

Throughout his mature life, from his mid-40s to his late-70s, Moses Coady thundered against the "vested interests" that kept the common people enchained and preached a gospel very close to syndicalism. Coady's granite idea, his fundamental legacy to the 21st century, was simply that unless the primary producers and industrial working class controlled production, talk of democracy was futile.

Coady thought that co-operative ownership was the one best way of accomplishing this transcendently blessed (or historically necessary) project. But this assumption carries some potentially dark impulses and anti-democratic tendencies. By the early 1950s, Coady's thought had taken a decided apocalyptic turn. He tried to present a brave public front in face of evidence that the co-operative movement was not fulfilling its divinely appointed mission. He wrote to Michael Gillis on January 31, 1951 that he had been talking to several of the priests around Antigonish who were in the dumps. Coady suggested to Father John Angus Rankin that "we get together a small number of our leading men who will meet as occasion offers from time to time....My idea would be that I would notify the fellows of a given area that some of the boys were to meet, say in Sydney, at a given time. Only the central fellows would know the whole gang. In this way we would avoid jealousies. This is only to resurrect the technique of a former day before we started Extension. The number is rather formidable but I can't see how we could possibly not take the fellows mentioned above." Coady thought that forming this vanguard of male conspirators would "keep up morale and build the fellows who are going to lead in the future; it will, and this is very important, create a very strong, although possibly a silent, pressure group that will keep all our top leaders on the right track, so to speak." This vanguard, meeting in "these little private seances," would determine what ideas "should prevail at say St. Joseph's Society, clergy meetings, rural and industrial conferences,..." (Coady to Gillis, January 31, 1951). This letter recalls the early, World War I days when Father Tompkins had spearheaded a conspiratorial elite of priests – "Bolsheviks of a better sort" – to shape the Church's social agenda. But this extraordinary letter to his mentor Gillis reveals Coady's own desperation, his manipulative side and how difficult it was for Catholics to act democratically. This great proponent of democracy was even willing, in his darkest hour, to engineer both the people and their leaders to control their own destinies. But if the Truth pre-exists communally validated learning processes and procedures, then the leader (or educator) is pressed toward manipulative and anti-democratic practices.

In his text, *Critical Social Science* (1987), Brian Fay distinguishes "educative" from "instrumental" modes of altering how people think and act. Instru-

mentalists assume that the “laws of social life have an independent power which can only be dealt with by ascertaining what these laws are and regulating actions accordingly” (p. 92). Because Coady, following St. Thomas, believes that “objective science” reveals the laws governing social life, Coady’s pedagogical action is oriented to enabling learners to bring their economic practice in line with revealed law. Coady wants the common people, fishers, farmers, coal miners, to reflect upon their life situations and transform their self-understandings. But he must necessarily be alarmed when the people’s reflective learning processes move away from revealed law, i.e. the co-operative blueprint or formula. Coady was fundamentally a social engineer who thought he was mandated to instrumentalize God’s blueprint in a dark world. His social engineering impulse is woven like crabgrass into his genuine longing for a democratic, people’s economy.

Dogmatists don’t make good democrats. Another dark impulse that resides within a world outlook that is premised on preexistent, revealed Truth is only manifest when the common people fail to live up to their historical mission. Even though Coady put on a brave public face about the future of the co-operative movement in the mid-1950s, progress in many sections of the country was disappointingly slow. The crooked world was unwilling to travel down the road Coady had in mind for it. Now Coady tapped into the shadowy side of hubris: he turned against the people who were not following the blueprint. In an astonishingly candid speech to the United Maritime Fishermen (UMF) on February 17, 1954, Coady railed against the fishermen whose poverty, illiteracy and ill-health had dulled their intelligence, weakened their wills and almost destroyed ambition. Coady accused the fishermen of ungratefulness. Even though the organization of the UMF was followed by increased prices for lobsters and other fish, all the fishermen still refused to come into the movement. An utterly dismayed and furious Coady lashed out at groups of individuals who still “shopped around from week to week and sell their lobsters to private profit dealers if they get an extra cent here and a half there....One moment’s thought should convince these canny in-and-outers that if there were no co-operatives the prices would immediately snap back to where they were in the old days. It takes education and enlightenment to know and weigh these things.”

Coady believed that some co-operative executives had betrayed the movement. “The enemy from without will naturally try his wiles on our business leaders, but the real enemy is the one from within. We know that in the credit unions, co-operative stores and producer co-operatives we have had leaders who have embezzled money, defrauded the people in some other ways and had secret agreements with old-line businessmen. By their betrayal they weakened the confidence of the people in the noble cause of co-operation. What is the answer to that? Education of course. If 80% of the fishermen of this country get the scientific knowledge, the proper understanding of social techniques, and the fundamental co-operative philosophy that will make them deadly in earnest, then no co-operative business manager anywhere in this country would dare allow himself to be bribed by the enemy.” Coady’s imagination was, in his dying days, haunted by images of the betrayal and moral weakness of the co-op movement’s leaders and the common people. But he also believed, more generally, that the world’s Church and democratic leaders had betrayed the masses of the earth. He believed that Western leaders had sold out the people and lacked the “stamina to oppose the monopolistic overlords, landlords and warlords who were enslaving the world.” He wrote to Rev. F.J. Smyth on July 13, 1956, that: “Only a declaration that will be as revolutionary as Christianity was two thousand years ago will jolt nominal Christians out of their lethargy and attract the heretical, schismatic and pagan world. We are only temporizing and playing a clever game of opportunism if we are going to keep on indulging in the platitudes that have been characteristic of our statements in the past.” The masses of the world were looking, so Coady imagined, to its Christian leaders for a declaration that would “strike them as a call to action by men who not only believe what they teach but give the impression that they are convinced of its ultimate triumph. This will enable us to avoid the imputation that we are waverers, if not apologists for a status quo that has very little to commend it.”

Once Moses Michael Coady assumed the prophet’s mantle and became God’s amanuensis, he trod a path that would inevitably lead him into some dark places. One might suggest, perhaps, that Moses Coady betrayed his own God by assuming that he knew that it was possible to find permanent order and harmony in a tiny part of the universe.

Christians have almost always believed that this world is not humankind's true home; permanence lies in eternity. Like Prometheus, Coady tried to steal some of God's fire, the coveted blueprint (or golden key) revealing God's plan for the earthly realm of economics, culture and politics. This impulse to control a world perceived to be on the verge of being engulfed by the evil of overlords, landlords and warlords is a distinctly modernist impulse. Modernists want a dominant meta-narrative, so did Coady. Modernists want a rational world governed by scientific knowing, so did Coady. Modernists incline to blueprints and one best ways of thinking and acting, so did Coady. When "utopian desire" couples with "modernism," a potent and dangerous brew is concocted.

Utopian modernism proffers a redemptive politics to the world. At the end of the barbarous 20th century, we know what a ghastly illusion communism and fascism were. We know, as well, that millions of people in the world were in the grip of fantastical ideologies. Coady tried to counter fascism and communism by offering an alternative, the co-operative blueprint. But he, too, was caught up in a redemptive narrative that failed to deliver what Coady thought it promised. Coady had not discovered the golden key or the holy grail of economic organization. Even with his relentless beating of the drum of "democratic control" of the

economy, Coady failed utterly to consider that the co-operative organization form could be only formally democratic (one person one vote) and could be anti-democratic in its internal governance. But, in my view, Coady's greatest failing is that he did not "respect the limits of the human capacity to change the world in which we live." Intellectual historian Martin Jay admits that "there has been a widespread recognition of the complexity of the world and of the difficulty of mastering or even steering that complexity" (Jay, *Tikkun*, November/December 1999). In fact, *Masters of Their Own Destiny*, the title of Coady's only published book, is a thoroughly modernist vision. Its desire is excessive and promethean in urge. The 20th century plainly indicates that the world usually breaks your heart and few of us have much control over our destinies. The horror and illusions of the 20th century might indicate to us that we should never again articulate a "redemptive politics," and that any "transformative vision" ought to be self-limiting. In fact, I disagree with Coady's simplistic reduction of social action to the economic realm. The experience of Nazism and 20th century inability to resist political evil, suggests, as Hannah Arendt has argued, the defense of republics by citizens who understand what they are defending.