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Life Sentence: The Real Syntax of Lifelong Learning

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This paper discusses the proposition that Lifelong Learning (LLL) is not necessarily the new dawn for mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds but on the contrary, a new form of social disciplining. It then inquires whether there is still a role for independent radical adult education in the era of mass and universal higher education or whether adult education, conventionally understood, is merely a hangover from the nineteenth century imperialism of knowledge exercised by liberal academics in pursuit of organic/national identities for the potentially disruptive lower orders.

In particular it tries to identify the conflicting ideological tensions working through the notion of lifelong learning from its origins in the European/UNESCO discourse of *Education Permanente* to the Blairite New Work Ethic. In the latter version, LLL might be characterised as new “technology of the self” in Foucault’s terms. Here the members of the underclass/underrepresented/deprived/dispossessed are encouraged to see their failure to secure adequate work and social inclusion as due to personal inadequacy rather than social inequity. LLL is rhetorically but not really available. Nevertheless, the failure to “upgrade skills,” gain new qualifications, develop portfolios, appropriate new capabilities and flexibly adapt to the global workplace is increasingly presented as personal failures to take the opportunity to learn. LLL becomes a cover for a new form of coercion, of self-reconstruction, which makes the self that fails to find a job or become a model citizen due to failing to take the appropriate course, or obtain the correct qualification. On the other hand global shifts of capital, low tax regimes, inadequate housing, health-care and a still rigidly stratified education system, which enables a well entrenched elite replete with cultural capital and social networks to reproduce itself, do not enter the picture.

How far are adult educators complicit in this new regime of truth? How far, because the demand

for the LLL originated in adult educational circles, have we accepted the rhetoric but neglected to see the serpent lurking beneath? Adult education is losing its marginality. The good aspect of this is that universities have to adopt the flexibility, student centredness, multi-layered approaches we have been advocating for more than two decades. The distaff side is that adult education has become mainstreamed and tied to internal recruitment protocols rather than civic/outreach missions. Where they still exist, adult education departments are forced increasingly to respond not to new educational needs expressed by social movements and individual cultural identities but the need of the university to recruit this or that kind of consumer (determined by governmental weighting strategies). The mechanisms of accountability, while offering the mirage of transparent operation, actually only mask practices and provision in obfuscating language, so that nobody is actually clear why what is done is done except that it satisfies a QA protocol or qualifies for a new batch of short term funding from a quasi-governmental agency.

The paper does not intend to be pre-lapsarian about this – no harking back to a golden age of footloose radical educators conducting a stately passage through unfailingly grateful working class communities, bringing enlightenment, class-consciousness and the desire for revolution. On the contrary, the history of institutional adult education is largely one of containment of transgressive desire, absorption of class-conflict and integration of subaltern groups into a manifestly unequal social settlement. In one mode adult education is merely part of the process of the symbolic reproduction of inequality, the part that secures adult consent to limited version of a meritocracy achieved through graduated qualifications while the elite layers continue to occupy the commanding heights. The rhetoric of LLL presents the diverse and contradictory elements of the education “system” as if it were a

seamless robe but, as the resistance to a universal form of credit on the part of the more prestigious British universities and their self-labelling as “research” universities indicates, this sector continues with an ancient agenda that will change only so far as to enable things to remain the same.

The function of adult educators, community developers, facilitators and animateurs will in some respects always be proscribed by the funding but the genius of adult education – perhaps to do with its

very marginality – has in the past always to be able to break out of the mould and work in creative and ultimately transgressive ways with the emergent, alternative and often oppositional voices that see in this form of education a way of crystallising new social needs and programmes for change. This paper makes a proposal for a new Popular CE/HE curriculum, which offers the opportunity for renewing this other vocation.