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Meanings and Manifestations of the Anarchist-Utopian Ethos in Adult Education

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Abstract: Anarchist-utopians in adult education ascribe considerable significance to learning that occurs away from the surveillance of formal education. First-generation anarchist-utopianism was different to that now shaping educational practice. In adult education, leading anarchist-utopians included Ivan Illich and John Ohliger.

Background and Purpose

Two unschooled men climbed Mt. Everest. Neither of the Wright Bros. had much formal education. More recently, Bill Gates and many other notable citizens dropped out of or didn't begin higher education. For example, the 2003 *Team New Zealand America's Cup* sailing syndicate was led by Tom Schnackenberg - a self educated farm-gate intellectual and University of B.C. doctoral dropout (Boshier, 2002). The irascible and uneducated Peter Jackson made *Lord of the Rings*.

Anarchist-utopianism is one of the "conflict perspectives" in Paulston's (1977) mapping of theory concerning social and educational change. At its centre is concern about the "hidden curriculum" of formal education, an emphasis on alternatives to formal education, opposition to mandatory continuing education and, most importantly, conviviality (see Illich, 1973; Ohliger, 1989)).

Neo-liberalism punctured the promise of first-generation anarchist-utopianism. Hence, by the 1980's, Tough's (1971) work on self-directedness dropped from sight, *Basic Choices* lost momentum, nobody went for deschooling and the notion of a democratic learning society (Boshier, 1980) seemed unrealistic. As neo-liberals dislodged social democrats or Labour parties embraced the radical right, there were grim warnings that excellence and ability to compete in the global economy requires formal education. First-generation anarchist-utopianism was good for a graduate essay but no longer a serious template for educational reform. Muddling along as a self-directed learner wouldn't suffice. Better to go to the stock than the learning exchange.

Not everyone can secure education in formal settings. Now, with formal education commanding less authority than before, self-directed adult learning is back in fashion. Indeed, many leaders of the new economy and those who excel in arts, sports and technology learn without the benefit of participation in formal education. Being unschooled or, for Bill Gates, being a Harvard dropout or, for Ed Hillary, a University of Auckland dropout, is a badge of honour. Globalisation, hyper-capitalism and information technologies have nurtured new forms of anarchist-utopianism? The presumed relationship between excellence and participation in formal education looks shaky and threadbare. Anarchist-utopianism is back.

Where did this new form come from and how does it differ from the earlier version promulgated by the likes of Tough, Carlson, Ohliger, Holt, Illich and, to a lesser extent, Freire? With this as a backdrop the purpose of this study was to compare first and second-generation anarchist-utopianism in adult education.

Methodology

This study was informed by a commitment to anarchist-utopianism, critical pedagogy and theory foregrounding learner subjectivity and the unmasking of power relations in educational practice. The author critically analyzed literature pertaining to first and second-generation anarchist-utopianism.

First-Generation Anarchist-utopianism

Anarchist-utopians distrust authorities and are suspicious of the motives and modus operandi of formal education. Learners are capable of doing-it-themselves and educational authorities have vested interests that rarely resemble those of learners. First generation anarchist-utopianism arose from the revolutionary fervour of the 1960's. The most exciting manifestations occurred in the 1970's when learning exchanges were created, peer-matching networks established and alternatives to formal education developed.

This ethos had a social democratic and hugely utopian foundation. It was congruent with new-left thinking and challenges to established authority. There was analysis of influential writers like Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. The architecture of lifelong education laid out in the Faure (1972) Report, Tough's work on self-directed learning, Illich's (1970, 1970a) call for deschooling, Goodman's (1964) condemnation of compulsory miseducation, Holt's (1964) analysis of *Why Children Fail*, Reimer's (1971) notion that *School is Dead* and numerous similar strands constituted first-generation anarchist-utopianism in adult education. Although first generation anarchist-utopianism is now muted, there are strong echoes of this strand of thought amongst "farm gate" intellectuals such as New Zealand film-maker Peter Jackson (*Heavenly Creatures, Lord of the Rings, King Kong*) and America's Cup gurus such as Tom Schnackenberg (Boshier, 2002, 2004). Captains of industry and left-intellectuals should be interested in knowing how such people went about learning what they needed to know to excel on the international stage.

Ivan Illich

During the heyday of first-generation anarchist-utopianism Illich's exhortations about the hidden curriculum of formal education, the need for deschooling and unfortunate tendency of elites to equate competence with formal education or learning with schooling, was noted in British Columbia. Hence, for the 1970 United Nations Week, Illich was brought to Vancouver where he lambasted schools as a manifestation of a "consumer society" and choked with "stifling ritual." He dismissed conventional schooling as a "way of incarcerating young men and women for hundreds of hours each year, so they will develop the institutional mentality" (Schools Should Be Abolished, *Vancouver Sun*, October 26, 1970). Learners are "schooled" to "confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence and fluency with the ability to say something new" (Illich, 1970a). He was still at it seven years later when, addressing a conference in Toronto, Illich lambasted experts in the professions. "They are more deeply entrenched than any guild, more international than any labour union, more stable than any party, endowed with wider competencies than any clergy and equipped with a tighter hold ... than any mafia" (Speakers Agree on Need for Change, *University Affairs*, Jan. 15, 1977). In Vancouver the extension department adored Illich and, from 1971 onwards, ran educational travel tours to his centre in Cuernavaca, Mexico ("there are no formal academic requirements or prerequisites" said the brochure).

John Ohliger

In academic adult education, John Ohliger's work was a provocative manifestation of first-generation anarchist-utopianism. Throughout the 1960's Ohliger had been a community activist and, at one point, found himself having to defend Nazi's wanting to be heard on a cooperative radio station. He became a Professor of Adult Education but would not conform to the more inane aspects of this work. Eventually, he settled into a job as a Library Assistant at the University of Wisconsin where, because of easy access to literature from politics, the arts,

history and education, he shook up the foundations of adult education. Ohliger was personally acquainted with Illich, Reimer and other anarchist-utopians and founded *Basic Choices*, a critical think tank that promoted voluntary learning, railed against the commodification of adult education and ran resistance at large meetings of the Adult Education Association (USA). His “six paths to alternative images” in adult education (Ohliger, 1989) summarized his literary and scholarly interests - although, as the always-stimulating and provocative *Second Thoughts* (the *Basic Choices* Newsletter) showed, his heart was in first-generation anarchist-utopianism (or, as he labelled it, “dystopian” images of alternative futures). Other strands in the anarchist-utopian resistance to mandatory continuing education are found in the *AEA/USA Task Force on Voluntary Learning* (Heaney, 1980). John Ohliger’s death on Sunday January 25th, 2004, signaled the passing of an era.

Edgar Faure

At the international level, one of the clearest manifestations of first-generation anarchist-utopianism was in the Faure (1972) Report. This stemmed from the work of Majid Rahnema and other members on the *International Commission on Educational Development* who had made special efforts to meet Illich and other critics of formal education. 1972 was a halcyon year for adult education because, as delegates milled in foyers of the Third UNESCO conference in Tokyo, presses in Europe disgorged *Learning to Be* - the Faure Report. Faure is important because of its global reach, its anarchist-utopianism, commitment to civil society and the challenge to formal education nested in the architecture for lifelong education.

For Faure, education and learning were too important to be left in the hands of educators. What was needed was a learning society where education would become the responsibility of a broad array of agencies and, most importantly, occur in informal and nonformal, as well as formal settings. Coombs (1985) and others associated with UNESCO had identified a worldwide crisis in education. The task for Faure and colleagues was to propose a template for reform that could be used in developing and developed countries. What mattered most about lifelong education was the proposal to legitimise (and develop) opportunities for learning across the lifespan in informal and nonformal, as well as the usual formal settings.

Faure was mugged on the road to the 21st century (see Boshier, 1998) but, as a Rahnema and Bawtree’s (1997) *Post-Development Reader* demonstrate, the anarchist-utopian impulse is alive, well and relevant to education at the dawn of the 21st century. Now it is even more important not to confuse lifelong education (with its emphasis on participation, democratisation and civil society) with lifelong learning (with its emphasis on the global economy, economic competitiveness, skills and individual learning).

Table 1 compares first and second-generation anarchist-utopianism. First-generation forms were committed to building vibrant civil societies, equilibrious social relationships, flat organisations. Second-generation forms manifest qualities shown on the right.

Table 1. *Factors Distinguishing First and Second-Generation Anarchist-utopianism*

	First-Generation	Second-Generation
a. <i>Prime motive</i>	Civil society	Economic competitiveness
b. <i>Optimal power relations</i>	Horizontal	Vertical
c. <i>Prime unit of Analysis</i>	Collectivity	Individuality
d. <i>Banner headline</i>	Lifelong education	Lifelong learning
e. <i>Learner label</i>	Participant	Consumer
f. <i>Minister-in Charge</i>	Education	Finance
g. <i>Aded themes</i>	Self-directedness Deschooling Voluntary learning Human needs	Individual choice Techno-zealotry Mandatory education Skill development
h. <i>Preferred method, technique or device</i>	Learning exchange	Surfing the Web
i. <i>Lead organisations</i>	UNESCO	OECD

Second-Generation Anarchist-utopianism

Second generation anarchist-utopianism was spawned by radical individualism nested in neo-liberalism expressed in Thatcherism, Reaganism, Mulroneyism, Rogernomics (in New Zealand) and belief systems that foreground the disciplinary merits of market forces and individual entrepreneurship. Utopian ideals nested in first-generation forms were seriously disrupted by the neo-liberal obsession with performativity, efficiency, cost-cutting and structural adjustment. These days it is the Minister of Finance (not the Minister of Education) that promotes individual lifelong learning. He or she urges learners not to depend on publicly provided education. Participation becomes a matter of choosing from options on the free market. The learner is now a consumer.

Second-generation anarchist-utopianism is deployed in the service of global capital. There are few exhortations about citizenship, democratisation or building civil society. Rather, the emphasis is on jobs, competition and skills. There is still an emphasis on learning out-of-school but it largely involves entrepreneurs and techno-wizards who have little time for the languid pace, indecisiveness and ambiguities of formal education. Second-generation anarchist-

utopians are comfortable with *lifelong learning*. For them, Illich's learning web is less interesting than the World Wide Web.

OECD spent a decade elaborating recurrent education and competing with UNESCO's notion of lifelong education. But, as neo-liberalism spread throughout OECD countries, analysts at the Paris headquarters needed something more seductive than recurrent education. Because of U.S. refusal to pay dues to UNESCO, that organisation went into decline. OECD then raided the UNESCO lexicon. Goodbye recurrent education, hello lifelong learning. Few people realised OECD purloined the label but not the contents of lifelong education. In a carefully worded statement, OECD claimed "there are some important differences between those strategies advocated in the 1970's and those appropriate today ... these differences are less conceptual than contextual ... they derive from ... major changes in wider economic and social contexts" (OECD, 1995, p. 6). But, by the time Europe celebrated their OECD-inspired *Year of Lifelong Learning* and other nations followed suit, people paying attention could see lifelong learning was a mean-spirited and techno-rational rendering of the social democratic yearnings, anarchist-utopianism and conviviality nested in the older UNESCO notion of lifelong education.

Future

Both versions of anarchist-utopianism are suspicious of formal education and committed to fostering independence and self-direction in learners. However, in the first-generation view there are collectivist impulses and an emphasis on conviviality. Second-generation anarchist-utopianism lacks conviviality and has more to do with skills and the global economy. In some manifestations (e.g. New Zealand) it is mean-spirited (Boshier & Benseman, 2000; Jesson, 1999). Yet it would be churlish for university-based scholars to dismiss new manifestations because they lack humour and are dressed in flashy technology and corporate garb. Nevertheless, it is important to ask about whose interests are served. Do not confuse new forms with the scruffy but convivial exhortations of activists like John Ohliger or Ivan Illich.

Far too many adult education scholars uncritically spout the rhetoric of lifelong learning as if it has something to do with earlier forms of lifelong education. Although the terminology is similar the social democratic ethos of first generation anarchist-utopianism has now all but disappeared. Moreover, care is needed because the idea learners can look after themselves gives cabinet Ministers tools to justify cuts to public education.

E-learning has already lost much of its lustre. But, what's left is firmly located in second-generation anarchist-utopian discourse. Although its advocates acknowledge the importance of "access" and "equity," E-learning bares almost no resemblance to the kind of social democratic and participatory preoccupations that enlivened first generation anarchist-utopians. Hence, adult educators should watch their language.

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