

Reclaiming Democracy, Reclaiming Our Place in Adult Education and the World.

Interview with professor **Peter Mayo**

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How would you describe the current 'paradigms' of adult education? It seems to me that we have at least EU's official learning talk (adult education as governmentality) as well as that of vocational consultants and corporate businesses (adult education as technocratic manipulation), and then there are some critical folks in the fringes (adult education as critical praxis and radical transformation).

The dominant discourse is underpinned by Neoliberal concepts. It is all part of the discourse concerning lifelong learning which places the onus on individuals to take charge of their own learning and to pay for this learning if need be. There is an over-emphasis on adult education for work and more precisely for 'employability' which does not necessarily mean employment, as Ettore Gelpi reminds us in one of his last works, *Lavoro Futuro* (Gelpi, 2002).

Carmel Borg and I wrote two pieces on the EU's Lifelong Learning Memorandum, one of which was published in *LLinE* (Borg & Mayo, 2004) and the other in *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (Borg & Mayo, 2005). We argued, also looking at some on the ground 'best practice' projects documented by CEDEFOP, that this type of adult education often serves as the vehicle for public financing of private needs and for promoting an easy correlation between the skills required at the workplace and the skills required in social life.

There is an excessively economic discourse about adult education that is worrying. It is all part of hegemonic globalisation. It is a discourse that projects the notion of citizen in two-dimensional terms: producer and consumer. I noticed this discourse in my meetings in Brussels when I was involved in two EU working groups, al-

though there seemed to be a great dissonance between the discourse of many adult education officials present and that coming from the Commission. As far as evaluation goes, there is an obsession with what Lyotard calls 'performativity' – so-called 'quality' indicators which are always of a quantitative nature since they are exclusively concerned with narrow outcomes and certainly not the 'in depth' analysis of processes, with no claims to generalisation, which would require a different type of evaluation. One could feel the tension between the ideas of those who attributed a larger and more humanistic agenda to the education of adults and the dominant narrow economic discourse often interspersed with some social democratic terminology.

It is encouraging, however, to see prominent writers such as Bill Williamson (1998), Ian Martin (2001), Kenneth Wain (2004) and even Zygmunt

Bauman (2005) criticise this kind of discourse, the first two offering an alternative conception of lifelong learning. For there is an alternative discourse rooted in praxis that we can find throughout the continent and elsewhere. It emphasises the role of the citizen as social actor, and the role of adult learning as a vital activity within social movements, including labour movements. It involves experiments such as the ‘participatory budget’ in Porto Alegre and Seville, community learning within the landless peasant movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST) in Brazil, and the various processes of adult learning which lie at the heart of the work of the social organisations that have made their presence felt at the World Social Forum and the various regional social fora.

These processes of adult learning, though part of a repressed adult education tradition, are in keeping with the concept of ‘globalisation from below’ – ‘counterhegemonic globalisation’ in Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ terms.

You have criticized the discursive turn from education to learning both in adult education and lifelong education. Our colleague Ian Baptiste stated once that ‘education is a normative enterprise, learning is not. I could learn to be a rapist, sexist, or psychopath, but none of these instances of learning would be an instance of education.’ What is the target point of your criticism?

This relates to what I have just said. I agree with Ian Baptiste’s distinction – so well put. The shift in terminology to which you refer is especially evident in the OECD and EU discourses. And it is not innocent. It reduces the emphasis on structures and institutions, which one found in writings concerning the older concept of ‘lifelong education’, and lays stress on the individual as a person who lies at the centre of the educational process with the potential to take charge of his/her own learning. There is a positive side to this. The em-

phasis on ‘learning’ can help convey the idea that it is not individuals who need to adapt to the institutions and agencies by which they are taught but it is the institutions and other agencies that must adapt to them. But there is a flip side to this, too.

This change in emphasis ties in beautifully with the current all-pervasive thinking that education and social well-being – as with the talk about the transition from the welfare state to a ‘welfare society’ – are the responsibility not of the State but of the individual and communities. By implication, any failure in this regard is to be blamed not on the system but on the individual or the communities concerned. In the latter case they are said to ‘lack social capital’.

In the issue of civil society, interpretations are many nowadays. What is your take on the question of civil society?

I recognise that the term has had different uses from the time of the ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ onward. I personally prefer to use Gramsci’s notion of civil society which refers to the complex set of ideological institutions that prop up the State and that serve to cement, as well as provide the spaces to renegotiate, existing relations of hegemony. This is a far cry from the romanticised notion of civil society as it is used today. It is romanticised in the sense that people seem to conceive of it as some kind of democratic and progressive force when this terrain also includes reactionary, right-wing forces such as religious fundamentalist groups related to all the major monotheistic religions, racist organisations, anti-immigrant groups, and so on.

Following Gramsci, I conceive of civil society as a site of struggle in which relations of hegemony are consolidated or challenged with a view to renegotiation. While civil society should not be romanticised, neither should it be regarded as monolithic. Hegemony is never complete and there

exist spaces where action for social change can take place. Adult education of the social justice type can constitute one of the many spaces in which action for change can occur.

Internationally, the best traditions of adult education oriented towards generating greater social justice have emerged in those social and political movements which have struggled to promote and realise the idea of a society not as it is now but as it should and can be. Their efforts in promoting adult education are motivated by a concern for social justice, ecological sensitivity and the strengthening of democracy. This is based on valuing social difference and biodiversity. Their efforts also involve an engagement in the struggle to recuperate public spaces – these public spaces have been shrinking over the years. They have often been the target of corporate encroachment and have often been commodified.

The world, as we know it, is in a state of constant change. Someone says that it is currently a mess if not a total chaos thanks to imperialist megaplayers such as the U.S. and its allied corporations. How do you see the role of radical adult education and radical scholarship in the future?

The word ‘radical’ can mean many things. It certainly does not identify a specific value commitment. Many had referred to Margaret Thatcher as a radical for having turned the British social and economic system around through the ideology of the marketplace. The same applies to Ronald Reagan. I assume that what you are referring to is social justice oriented radicalism. As you and many readers know, we have a strong albeit repressed tradition in the area, certainly as far as adult education goes. There was once talk of ‘really useful knowledge’. Many of the values that this tradition promoted, such as the collective dimensions of knowledge and learning; critical literacy; genuinely democratic relations; linking the cultur-

al and the economic; a commitment towards the oppressed in terms of class, gender (including sexual orientation), 'race'/ethnicity, ability and age; a commitment towards peace, based on human rights, remain valid and need to be stressed. They need to be stressed in this age characterised by increasing militarisation, trading of blood for oil, and a forceful presence of the military-industrial complex – Eisenhower once spoke of the academic-industrial military complex. How true this is of the situation today, as Giroux argues in *The University in Chains!*

The values of this repressed tradition remain central for a social justice oriented radical project in an age when public spaces are constantly commodified and subjected to corporate encroachment. They remain central in an age when the dominant media and the state's repressive apparatus make their presence felt. We witness, with regard to the latter, the State's ever increasing policing function against dissenters and the victims of neoliberalism: the so called 'undeserving poor', immigrants forced to flee their land as a result of the colonial and neocolonial ransacking of their continent. These values continue to be central in an age when consent continues to be manufactured, through a pernicious global media, to support wars based on lies which, if we take the USA as an example, are actually waged on two fronts: abroad and at home. In the latter case, the war is waged against the victims of discriminating neoliberal policies through cut-backs in funding for social programmes to finance the debt incurred by the senseless imperialist war in Iraq.

Social justice oriented adult education and scholarship have many challenges to face. Freire spoke about our reading the word and the world. I would add that reading the world would also entail reading its construction through the media. This is what don Lorenzo Milani encouraged his students to do in the afternoon sessions at Barbiana when the major source of

reading and learning was the newspaper with its particular constructions of reality. Today this would entail, more than ever, 'reading' not only the printed word but the projected images, sound bites, etc. Critical media literacy plays an important role here, and one of the big challenges for any kind of genuinely social-justice oriented educational effort is to bridge the digital divide for a critical counter-hegemonic use of information technology.

Taking my cue from Giroux's recent writings, as I have done throughout most of this reply to your question, I would argue that this also entails viewing a variety of facilities and agencies such as cinemas, museums, television, music, video games, DVDs, blogs, YouTube, architecture, religious institutions, etc. as sites of 'public pedagogy.' They are all central to the workings of hegemony. And since hegemony is never complete, they offer spaces for a counter discourse.

The sites in which educators can work and which they can target are legion, as Gramsci indicated more than seventy years ago. He explored possibilities among the serial novels. One left-wing publishing house in Germany, Argument, which produces the well known social theory journal *Das Argument*, has been producing popular fiction in the form of police novels with a strong left-wing and counter-discursive bent.

Popular culture is one of the domains through which hegemony occurs, as the British school of cultural studies had grasped a long time ago. This area needs to be given importance in any kind of counter-hegemonic adult education project. So too is the area of so-called 'high' culture. For instance, both these domains, which are much more related historically than many would have us believe, play an important part in the development of our sensibilities with respect to, say, the Muslim 'other', as I have argued with colleagues in papers/chapters dealing with museum adult education as cul-

tural politics – see my book with Carmel Borg (Borg & Mayo, 2006).

As far as scholarship goes, there is a huge battle to be waged. Many scholars work in universities which are increasingly becoming corporatised and where the emphasis is once again on 'performativity' in Lyotard's sense of the term – everything is measured in specific and 'effective' outcomes. Bureaucratisation is turning the work of several academics into a farce, based on a false sense of accountability. The Bologna process has facilitated this in our part of the world. And, make no mistake, this form of bureaucratisation has made its presence felt across the Atlantic and is very much linked to the corporate culture ideology.

How do scholars collectively resist this transformation from an institution that was once a major contributor to a democratic public sphere into a glorified training agency embracing the corporate business culture? How do academics reclaim the product of their own labour in an age when funding provided by the corporate sector comes with strings attached? How do academics for instance resist reproducing the elitism induced by the corporate academic culture when they undervalue work by colleagues published in rigorously peer-reviewed 'open access' online journals? These type of journals constitute one of the means that allow academics to regain control over their own work and to evade the clutches of the corporate publishing sector.

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FURTHER READING AND AUDIO

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