



A Political Sociology Of Adult Education A Research Agenda

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1. Introduction*

With the publication of the Southam Report in Canada (1987) showing the widespread functional illiteracy of vast sectors of the Canadian population, and the renewed discussion on the shortcomings of literacy training programmes in the U.S. (Kozol, 1985; Gee, 1986), adult education has become again a priority for policy makers in industrial advanced societies. This article challenges some of the basic assumptions of conventional mainstream adult education, taking advantage of the experience and theories mainly developed in dependent-development societies of Latin America.

A political sociology of adult education takes as a starting point the relationships between the capitalist state and adult education. Therefore, the notion of the State should be considered central to any attempt to understand the "new" rationale for policy formation in this field. Some questions and queries on adult education policy formation are advanced here, and a new agenda for research is advocated.

2. Current Conceptions And Goals Of Adult Education Programmes

By definition, adult education and literacy training programmes have a broad range of goals and use several different methods and strategies. In general, adult education is conceived of as a means of providing a vast range of skills, abilities, intellectual patterns, and social and political values for a growing sector of a nation's population. Sometimes overlapping with the notion of "basic education" as defined by the World Bank (World Bank, 1974), adult education is assumed to be different from universal primary education in so far as it is concerned with the minimum learning needs of a specially identified group, particularly in Third World countries. It tends to transcend the hierarchy of the educational system and is provided in different forms in different countries, both through non-formal and formal means.

Nonetheless, the range of aims and goals of adult education activities varies from developing positive attitudes towards co-operation, work, community and national development and further

learning, to the teaching of functional literacy and numeracy; from providing a scientific outlook on health, agriculture and the like, to incorporating functional knowledge and skills; from preparing individuals to enter into the labour market or strengthening their current occupational position, to making available functional knowledge and skills necessary for civic participation (Coombs, *et al.* 1973).

From a different and more radical point of view, literacy training and adult education have enormous advantages as a field for the development of innovative educational and political practices. Paulo Freire and the other educators for liberation originally developed their educational/political strategies in this field through their work in Latin America and Africa¹.

From this more radical political perspective, there are several significant factors which underscore the advantages of adult education over formal education, as part of a political strategy. Firstly, so far as community needs and problems are used as a basis for designing the content and vocabulary for adult literacy programmes, the political implications of adult education vastly exceed those of formal schooling. Secondly, adult education programmes are usually better linked to community needs and are more responsive to community pressures than the formal schooling system.

Adult education, as emancipatory practices, can therefore be understood as a form of education developed *by* the oppressed rather than *for* the oppressed. Thirdly, this education has the curricular and organizational flexibility that formal schooling lacks. Fourthly, the results of adult education are more immediate than the results achieved through formal schooling. It is not necessary to wait for ten to fifteen years, as with formal training, for the graduate to be incorporated into the labour market or into political activities. Fifthly, those who are likely to demand adult education in peripheral capitalist societies tend, according to this education perspective, to be the dispossessed. This is due to their lack of power. Furthermore, it shows that illiteracy, far from being a "social illness" as is often claimed, is an outcome of a hierarchical class struggle or of violent historical processes

such as colonization. Finally, adult education and literacy programs have demonstrated their importance as instruments for developing political consciousness in some processes of transition to socialism in such countries as Cuba or Nicaragua (Fagen, 1969; La Belle, 1986; Armove, 1986).

3. The Contribution Of Adult Education To Development

One could next raise the question pertaining to the contribution of adult education to socio-economic development. What are the social and economic returns of adult education? Several studies thoroughly summarize the most important research done on this subject. (Waiser, 1980: 4ff; IDRC, 1978). Waiser shows that some authors believe adult basic education contributes to economic development in the following ways: 1) by raising the productivity of the new literates; 2) by raising the productivity of individuals working with literates - the so-called "spillover benefit" of literacy, 3) by expanding the flow of general knowledge to individuals (e.g. instructions about health care and nutrition), thus reducing the cost of transmitting useful information; 4) by acting as a device for selecting the more able individuals and thereby enhancing their occupational mobility, and 5) by strengthening economic incentives: that is, the tendency for people to respond positively to a rise in the rate of reward for their efforts (Waiser, 1980; Blaug, 1966: 393-394; Phillips, 1970; La Belle & Verhine, 1978; 7-27). Particularly in farming activities, better allocative decisions which could be made as a result of adult education, could increase the economic return from primary activities. It has been argued that shifting from production of self-subsistence crops to the production of grain or fruit for the market could in the long run increase farmers' productivity and welfare, and adult education programs can play a role in such processes of change (Muñoz Izquierdo, 1982).

The contribution of adult education to growth is smaller than the early human capital theorists and development economists thought. The correlation between earnings and education picks up many other influences on earnings that are also correlated with schooling but should not be attributed to it (Camoy, 1982). Hence, much of the recent research has cast some doubts on the validity of the above stated premises. First, available evidence tends to suggest that the wage structure depends upon variables exogenous to individual productivity. These variables include gender, race, the nature of a firm's market of goods, maintenance of class structure in the face

of meritocratic rules, degree of monopoly power in the market, and/or social class background (Camoy et al, 1979; Camoy, 1977: 39).

Different rates of return to education are therefore not the result of inequality in the distribution of schooling, but are instead related to the basic inequality structures of commodity production societies (Camoy, 1975: 5-6; Levin, 1980; Bowles, 1980: 207; Bowles, 1975: 47).

Secondly, the role of the State in education and income policy is a crucial variable in determining income distribution. In this sense, taxation, wage fixing, price control, inflation and employment policies are the means by which the State exercises this power - policies that are out of reach of adult education programmes.

Thirdly, a decisive standpoint from which to study the relationships between education, income distribution and capital accumulation is the theory of labour market segmentation. In the light of this theory, labour market conditions can be understood as outcomes of four segmentation processes: 1) segmentation into primary and secondary markets, 2) segmentation within the primary sector, 3) segmentation by race, and 4) segmentation by gender. The primary and secondary segments are differentiated because primary jobs require and encourage stable working habits while, at the same time, the skills are generally obtained through "on-the-job" training. Wages are high compared to other segments. Secondary jobs, on the contrary, do not encourage stable work habits. Wages are relatively low and the job turnover is very high. Jobs in this segment are primarily taken up by youth, minorities and women. (Reich et al, in Camoy, 1975: 1).

Although the theory of segmented labour markets has a particular relevance to advanced industrial societies², it does help us to understand that adult education in dependent capitalist societies simply prepares people for improving their chances to enter the secondary labour market. It duly cautions us not to assume that education and training lead automatically to higher income distribution through increasing per capita productivity which leads, in turn, to higher earnings. And perhaps, through adequate theorizing, it would be possible to link a theory of labour market segmentation with the theory of the combination of modes of production, and therefore to explain in a more precise fashion how adult education intersects with pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of production in a given dependent society³.

Modernization theorists have overwhelmingly assumed that adult basic education is useful for improving skills among low-technical levels of workers and peasants, particularly those with a tendency to migrate, thus making them more employable, and reducing unemployment, underemployment and migration of the labour force - which, in turn, has demographic consequences. Other authors have identified types of differential outcomes produced by literacy training, distinguishing between purely cognitive effects, social effects, and instrumental effects (Bhola 1981: 9-11). A critical assessment is challenging this perspective on many grounds, particularly by questioning the same definition of literacy and basic education and its role in the production of the social life (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Let us add to Freire and Macedo's critical perspective the need to develop a consistent theory of the relationships between political power, political authority and adult education in advanced and dependent-development societies.

4. Understanding Of Adult Education Policies Needs An Understanding Of The Role Of The State: New Questions for Old Answers.

What is missing from the conventional framework outlined above? First of all, it does not offer a, or rather any, theory of adult education reform, and of the underlying political rationality of reformist efforts in this area of research and policy making. This is due, in part, to the lack of an explicit theory of the state that could come to terms with the process of public policy making in dependent capitalist states.

Secondly, adult education programmes are not seen (as perhaps they should be) as part of a series of factual responses to the *legitimation crisis* of capitalist societies (to borrow a term from Habermas), and therefore related to the need for political legitimation of the Capitalist State. Paradoxically, this is due to the overemphasis placed by researchers and policy planners on the economic determinants of educational policies, either from a functionalist perspective (always looking for a functional policy to improve the performance of the economy and the productivity of the labour force) or even from an orthodox Marxist perspective which addresses reality only through the lenses of the role of education in the extraction of surplus values and, in so doing, has

failed to capture the significance of superstructural activities for social reproduction.

I will argue, instead, that since any capitalist state has a class content reflected in its policy-making, adult education policies constitute an example of class-determined policies oriented to confront the political and social demands of the powerless and impoverished sectors of any capitalist society. The issue is then, why and how does the capitalist State address the needs of the masses by ways of adult education programmes, instead of simply leaving them alone? Indeed, the political economy of the State is organized to support the development of a social formation directed towards commodity-production. State economic interventionism is therefore oriented towards performing those functions which Capital is unable to perform due to the fact that it is made up of many fractionalized and mutually antagonistic parties. However, *State interventionism tends to be oriented toward strengthening the legitimacy of the current ruling alliance as a prerequisite to sustaining a given pattern of capital accumulation.*

Any mode of State intervention and most of the State's policies are therefore linked to a changing pattern of potential or actual threats to the political system, or to structural problems that emerge out of the process of accumulation of capital. The modes of state activity can thus be seen as responses to these social threats and problems (Wright, 1978; O'Donnell, 1978a; 1978b; Offe, 1975: 137-147).

In this regard, it is important to note that adult education policies, like any educational policy, are also subject to an intense inter-bureaucratic struggle in centralized educational systems, and therefore, much of the policy outcomes would reflect these bureaucratic clashes. What does this mean for adult education?

The issue is how do adult education policies relate to the process of capital accumulation and political domination in capitalist societies? Has political rationality proven to be so far more important than technical rationality in the promotion of adult education reforms? In this respect, what has been the role of distinct and factional bureaucratic ideologies in adult education policy formation? What benefits can individuals and their families obtain by undertaking further adult education? Particularly, what is the use of literacy or adult basic education in the light of segmented labour markets, rising unemployment and interest-group oriented public policies, considering that as long as businesses have the upper hand, the basic decisions of

human life are taken away from the individual? Why are even innovative adult education programmes based upon individualistic assumptions while, in view of the increasing state interventionism, the opposite assumption (collective action and behaviour) seems to be the only chance that the poor would have to cope with the loss of power of the common citizen?

The questions posed above are much more fruitful for concrete research on adult education policies than the conventional view of adult education programmes as a tool for development or as an agent of change. This is particularly so because the available empirical evidence hardly shows any contribution of adult education policies and programmes towards those ends.

The grasping of the inner rationality of adult education programmes will help us to understand under which social and political conditions and for what purposes will a capitalist State undertake a new substantial reform in adult education programmes and policies. To what degree can new policies in this field, as a minor piece of the State educational policies, be related to the spectrum of political conflict in civil society? Should a new adult education strategy be viewed as an effective mode of national integration of the masses which the ruling elite is using to mould the people and marginal groups into a Nation State? Or, should this policy be viewed, instead, as an instrument which counteracts the decommodification⁴ of the labour force?

In this regard, to what extent would any new adult education policies in dependent societies as well as advanced societies represent - as is often argued by policy-makers - some sort of response to new demands from the labour market for skilled labour? Or instead, to what extent would they represent an expression of an educational bureaucracy acting independently of the needs of capitalist development? Is there an inner bureaucratic rationale for educational planning which can be thought of as part of a "law of motion of a bureaucracy"? Are there any other alternative "laws" operating in public policy formation which underpin adult education reforms?

5. Need For Analytic Frameworks To Study Public Policy Making.

Coming back to the role of educational practices in social reproduction, educational institutions have been viewed as a versatile apparatus which contributes to the political legitimization of the status quo, to the reproduction

of the existing social relations of production and the political culture, and to Nation building or, alternatively, for political consciousness-raising. Education has also been very often seen as a prerequisite for human capital formation and capital accumulation. Viewed in this light, it is important to point out that education, as an activity mandated, sponsored and supervised by the State, is as much an apparatus of the State as any other agency.

However, one can hardly understand education's function in capitalist society - educational plans and programmes, codes, practices and policies - unless one emphasizes that capitalist education, like the capitalist state, has a *dual character*. On one hand, capitalist education is used to provide means to contribute to the reproduction of the capitalist system, either as a tool to enlarge capital accumulation and labour force reproduction, or as an instrument able to enhance political domination structures, practices and codes. On the other hand, education forcefully expresses the notion of national sovereignty and the demands of civil society upon the State. That is to say, education is concerned with people's consciousness and their expectations concerning greater social mobility, the attainment of higher personal skills with which to achieve better positions in the labour markets, or organized efforts which seek social, economic and political democratization. Education is also concerned with knowledge construction, transmission and reproduction; knowledge that may constitute in and by itself a gratifying experience of social and individual learning.

And, while capitalist education is in strong correspondence with the social organization of labour and with the social relations of production, it constitutes in itself a moral and empirical expression of democracy in capitalist societies. In this sense, almost every single educational institution is far more democratic, open to change and innovation, and subject to potential community control than any other State apparatus or the workplace.

6. Towards A New Research Agenda For Adult Education

In establishing the connection between the State's role and its adult education activities, one can argue that to inquire into the reasons behind the growth of adult education programmes, how they have been devised historically, by whom, for what purposes, and

how they are related to their educational clientele, is to ask for an explanation of the determinants of adult education policy formation in a way that is beyond and above the simplistic and perhaps misleading problem-solving approach. Expressed in more conventional terms, this inquiry means finding out and explaining which independent and intervening variables account for policy differences.

All in all, it can be claimed that it is necessary to inquire about policy formation in the light of the following dimensions: 1) *the main actors of policy formation*, including the bureaucracy, administrative agents and social constituencies and clienteles; 2) in terms of organizational studies, the *main systemic elements* which can be found within a given setting of educational policy formation (following Therborn's list); 3) *the main institutional phases, stages and/or units of policy formation*, that is to say, the levels of policy-planning, policy-making, policy-operation and even the policy outcome; 4) *the intellectual, institutional and ideological atmosphere* where those decisions are made which will be termed "the policy framework". Additionally, it can be argued that those dimensions are offset or shaped by the *general framework of organizational rules*, which are, in turn, historically laid down and superimposed in an organization-structure. Finally, it is important to identify *the production rules of public policy* with which to understand educational relationships between the political society and the civil society at a particular point in time.

Several questions and queries have been advanced in this paper; questions that call for concrete empirical research on adult education policies and programmes in Third World societies. At the same time, this agenda for research points out the need for a dialectical theory of adult education - a theory that is still to be developed in order to overcome the analytical weakness of the conventional views on the contribution of adult education to liberal democracy and national development.

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Notes

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1. See for instance Paulo Freire, Rosiska and Miguel Darcy de Oliveira, Claudious Cecon *Vivendo e Aprendendo - Experiences do IDAC in Educacao Popular*, San Paulo, Livraria Brasileira Editora, Third Edition, 1980. Also, Torres, 1982, 1984.
2. The notion of segmented labour markets is assumed in the context of monopoly capitalism and therefore grants a high degree of homogeneity to a given social formation. In Latin America, the segmentation processes could be considered simultaneously as an horizontal and a vertical process. At the "vertical level," the segmentation is due to the combination of modes of production (precapitalist and capitalist ones), which imply different labour markets for different workers. At the "horizontal level," however, the process of segmentation of labour markets, particularly in the most advanced modes of production, is somehow similar to the discussion posed for the advanced industrial societies concerning the historical specificities of the dependent societies.
3. In analyzing craft training programmes in Guyana, K. Bacchus argues that the labour market for craftsmen was not homogeneous, and that it was segmented into a "high wage" market and a "low wage" market in terms of demand and supply for skilled labour. This heterogeneity is further reflected within the "modern", high-paid sector itself. However, focusing on the low-wage sector, Bacchus forcefully argues that while the effect of upgrading skills through training undoubtedly resulted in a higher rate of private investment in their training by these artisans, "the effect of this (improved training) was that they were pricing themselves out of the "low wage" sector of the economy and, since the demands in the "high wage" sector were not increasing fast enough to absorb them, a high percentage of them remained unemployed" (Bacchus, 1976: 120). So, looking at the linkages between the pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of production in peripheral capitalism, it is important to note that, despite the hopes of policy-planners and politicians, adult education and training cannot easily cope with the economic needs of the poor and ever-increasing marginalized social sectors. This is the case when the situation is one of economic stagnation, chronic and increasing unemployment, and when the economy cannot grow as fast as the labour force in order to provide enough jobs in the primary markets of the economy while, at the same time, the same combination of mode of production is undermining the traditional basis of subsistence of farmers, artisans and the like. It is obvious that adult education programmes could not solve the gap between traditional and advanced modes of production, nor could they contribute significantly to the short-term needs of the poor. Thus, it is not surprising at all that adult education and training programmes are less and less appealing to men and women seeking jobs: the private investment is high but the economic return insignificant in the low-wage sector of the economy.
4. This term refers to the thesis that "decommodified" forms of social organization of labour power and of the value produced by society are growing quantitatively. These "decommodified" life forms, in the view of Claus Offe, tend increasingly to become a problem of social stability to be dealt with by political means, in so far as such social groups, excluded from the social life form of wage labour, yet nevertheless subject to relations of capitalist domination, represent a potential for rebellion. (Offe, 1984).

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