

History of Education special issue

Working class education and social change in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain.

Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed the waning fortunes of social class as a historical category of analysis. In particular working class education is rarely discussed in historiography although there has been significant work done in this area, particularly in adult education and literacy. A re-assessment of these studies allows us to examine the ways in which working class educational initiatives have been conceived in the past and how they might be approached in the future.

Working class educational history provides a valuable perspective from which to understand social change in education. The education of the working class has been a pervasive and thorny issue which has resonated widely with implications for the organisation and values of society in general. Subordinate groups have not only contested dominant discourses within and beyond education but also established their own initiatives. Understanding even the small group or protest draws one into an analysis of the broader canvas within which it operates. In particular adult education and literacy are rich and diverse areas where working class people have been active.

Although historians of education often trace their work to current debates and policies, early twenty first century Britain would not at first sight seem to be a propitious standpoint from which to understand working class education. Indeed, our

current situation provides a very different lens than previously for understanding working class movements. According to one view, processes of ‘globalisation’ have strained adult education through a neo-liberal sieve from which human capital versions of ‘lifelong learning’ have been retained while liberal education has been discarded. Indicative of the altered situation, two UNESCO reports are often compared: *Learning to Be* (1972) with its nod towards liberal and lifelong education has been dislodged by *Teaching: the Treasure Within* (1996) and its embrace of lifelong learning.¹ In this new context a particular notion of learning has become all-pervasive: individuals are expected to take responsibility for updating their skills in order to keep abreast of rapid economic and technological changes. Arguably, this tidal change has left the notion of ‘working class education’ stranded, seemingly cut off from mainstream developments. In addition, since the 1980s social class in general has been eclipsed from public life in Britain; in its place we have more fragmented categories such as the socially excluded or, more specifically, those in receipt of free school meals. It has even been claimed the concept of class is ‘dead’.² Yet examples of social class continue to intrude upon this apparently settled scene – in 2006 even the Conservative Party’s Social Justice Unit noted the significant and continuing role of social class in education. In short, the working class has become an ‘absent presence’, rarely spoken of yet pervasive.

A more positive reading of this process would be that marginal forms of educational activity have finally been recognised by policy makers and entered the mainstream.

¹ Faure, Edgar et al. *Learning to Be: the World of Education Today and Tomorrow*. Paris: UNESCO, 1972. Delors, Jacques, *Learning: the Treasure Within*, Paris: UNESCO, 1996. See also, “From the ‘Great Tradition’ to ‘Celebrity Big Brother’: Whatever Became of Adult Education?” editorial, *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 24, no 6 (2005): 455-57.

² Pakulski, J. and M. Waters. *The Death of Class*. London: Sage, 1996.

For instance, adult education is no longer a discrete minority based practice; rather it is something that everyone potentially does. Indeed, the influence of this thinking in England can be identified in a raft of policies and initiatives such as extended schools, widening participation and family learning to name a few. In 1998 David Blunkett, as secretary of state for education, made much of the educational traditions of working class self-help in framing *The Learning Age* although this may have been more a result of Blunkett's increasingly distant history in socialist politics and less a reflection of recent Labour Governments in general.³ This recognition of working class educational initiatives may in fact be a very selective use of the past to justify contemporary policy.

In order to unravel the connections and discontinuities between the history of working class education and current developments it is necessary to view the past through a number of variegated lenses. We need to recognise that 'working class' can be a multiple and diffuse category as well as a tightly defined one and that it has been implicated in many contests over education. Paradoxically our current educational world is also beginning to bear more resemblance to an earlier period prior to the advent of the welfare state, a time when class pervaded British society. For instance, supposedly 'new' phenomena such as middle class fear of failing⁴ or the growing privatisation of education are two trends with similarities to the late nineteenth and

³ See also Yeo, Stephen. *Organic Learning: Mutual Enterprise and the Learning and Skills Agenda*. Leicester: NIACE, 2000.

⁴ McCulloch, Gary. "Education and the Middle Classes: the Case of the English Grammar Schools, 1868-1944." *History of Education* 35, no 6 (2006): 689-704.

early twentieth centuries.⁵ It is also possible that the history of working class education may also come into clearer perspective once again.

The speed of these changes has been remarkable. Social class has passed from being a central category of historical analysis into a state of virtual oblivion within two decades. For generations of historians, especially in the post-war period, class had been a ubiquitous explanation of social change and was a crucial lens for sifting and analysing evidence. By contrast, we would find class to be almost equally absent from more recent historiography – the class emperor may have had no clothes after all – although this would be less true in history of education.⁶ However, it is fascinating to note that the years during which class analysis declined also coincided with a significant increase in economic inequality throughout the world. By charting the ways in which working class education has been conceived historically it may prove possible to work through this conundrum and to see how it may yet enrich our understanding of the past. This provides an opportunity to re-think the nature and contradictions of working class education about which much has been written. One place to start this process is the rich and wide-ranging historical work on adult education in which many generations of working class people were imbricated.

Adult education

Understanding the nature and significance of this participation has been a major preoccupation of educational historians. Many histories of adult education have occluded our vision of the social, political and economic movements which worked

⁵ For two different takes on private education see Gardner, Phil. *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England*. London: Croom Helm, 1984 and West, E.G. *Education and the State*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 3rd ed. 1994.

⁶ For a critique of class in general see Joyce, Patrick. *Visions of the People*. Cambridge: CUP, 1990.

for the emancipation of the working class in the nineteenth century. As early histories began to recognise these movements they also systematically downgraded them. Indeed, the growth of adult education into a self-conscious 'movement' during the early twentieth century provided a context from which to mould an understanding of historical change. For instance, the '1919 Report' of the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee would be marked by a sense of progressivism and a searching for roots of the present. It usefully surveyed the historical development of adult schools, mechanics institutes, Chartism and co-operation, people's colleges and university extension but, in its eagerness to consider policy implications in terms of a wider educational *system*, these earlier movements were treated as fragmented precursors to the present:

In the absence of the earlier stages of training, experiments in adult education too often have resembled an attempt to roof a house before the walls were completed.... efforts to build up adult education, which were previously in the nature of forlorn, if heroic, enterprises... are at length finding their proper place as one element in a training which extends through childhood and adolescence to manhood and womanhood.⁷

This whiggish interpretation of social change saw earlier 'experiments' as well-intentioned but doomed to failure given the lack of preparatory education as well as 'demoralizing industrial conditions'. The committee viewed itself as a fulcrum that would tip the balance away from the patchy initiatives of the past towards a system in which adult education was available to all who needed it. Social change, by implication, had been a one-way process of gradual widening towards more

⁷ Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee. *Final Report*. London: HMSO, 1919, 10.

comprehensive provision. Although this approach would seem to have much in common with the views of the Fabians Sydney and Beatrice Webb, who aimed to replace the voluntarism of many working class associations with the efficiency of state machinery,⁸ the committee did in fact support the WEA, a voluntary association. By outlining a system of financial support it also helped to delineate a varied pattern of adult education which was not adopted into policy but did serve as a prompt to further activity and understanding. While this vision recognised the importance of working class agency it also curtailed and boxed it in as one element of a wider educational structure.

Moreover, aspects of this approach would continue for many years. Even though AE Dobbs' 1919 account was much more creative in so far as it analysed education in relation to wider social change, he nevertheless concluded that the WEA had 'drawn together a variety of movements...'⁹ In addition, Robert Peers would later contrast the 'adult education movement' of the twentieth century with the 'isolated experiments' of the nineteenth.¹⁰ Thomas Kelly would also write a history of adult education as an 'autonomous' account which made few connections to wider social changes. He claimed that a system of adult education had grown incrementally by the 1970s:

...this fourfold partnership of the central government, the local education authorities, the universities, and the voluntary organisations, lumbering and

⁸ Yeo, Stephen. "Notes on Three Socialisms." In *Socialism and the Intelligentsia*, edited by Carl Levy. London: Routledge, 1987. Potter, Beatrice. *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891.

⁹ Dobbs, A.E. *Education and Social Movements, 1700-1850*. New York: Augustus Kelly, orig. 1919, 250-51. See also Silver, Harold. "Education and the Labour Movement: a Critical Review of the Literature." *History of Education* 2, no 2 (1973).

¹⁰ Peers, Robert. *Adult Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, orig. 1958.

creasing as it has sometimes been, has produced a system of adult education that is varied, comprehensive, and infinitely responsive to individual needs.¹¹

Thus a well-oiled and efficient system was presented as the outcome of the spontaneous and organic activity of various bodies. In fact, organisational forms represented by paid professionals delivering a service to the general public had overlaid the working class progenitors of adult education. Thus acceptance into a wider system of adult education came at the price of its continuing institutional marginality.

These perspectives emphasised the notion of liberal education as inextricably linked to adult education. Indeed, 'liberal education' became the key descriptive label for adult education during much of the twentieth century, epitomised by university extra-mural work as well as the WEA which ran three year courses modelled on the university degree even though groups were democratically run and generally rejected certification.¹² In the long-term critics would note that such liberal studies opened the door to middle class domination and the WEA would experience continuing insecurities over whether it was in fact a working class organisation.

In reality the idea of liberal adult education was a contested practice and a other historians would retain an explicit focus on class. Certainly class conflict within and over forms of adult education is a recurring theme well analysed by both JFC

¹¹ Kelly, Thomas. *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2nd ed. 1970 orig 1962, 395.

¹² For the WEA see Stocks, Mary. *The Workers' Educational Association: the First Fifty Years*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1953. Fieldhouse, Roger. *The Workers' Educational Association: Aims and Achievements, 1903-1977*. Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1977. Roberts, Stephen K. *A Ministry of Enthusiasm*. London: Pluto, 2003.

Harrison and Brian Simon.¹³ For instance, there were considerable rifts with what became known as ‘independent working class education’ which crystallised following the 1909 Ruskin College strike sparked by students who favoured the teaching of marxist economics. This impulse would spurn the Plebs League, Central Labour College (CLC) and National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), organisations that would favour education directly related to class struggle and social action. Activists made much of their independence from state funding and contrasted their work to the WEA which was represented as both dependent and bourgeois.¹⁴ These activities would flourish in the inter-war years although after 1945 they lost their radical edge and eventually became incorporated into the increasingly conservative trade union movement. Again this tendency to portray a fall from grace, from an early radicalism to a gradual incorporation into established and conservative forms, has been a constant theme of writing about the working class and radical education. An alternative view would emphasise the strengths of incorporation and the potential to influence mainstream forms from within.¹⁵

These conflicts were also indicative of historical work which mined this oppositional seam of working class history. Having themselves been saturated in political and educational debates, historians would uncover and develop arguments around class in relation to social change. For example, EP Thompson, an adult education tutor, would

¹³ Harrison, J.F.C. *Learning and Living*. London: Routledge, 1961. Simon, Brian. *Studies in the History of Education*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1960. *Education and the Labour Movement*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965.

¹⁴ For instance, Simon, Brian, editor. *The Search for Enlightenment*. Leicester: NIACE, 1990. Craik, W.W. *Central Labour College*. London: , 1964 and Millar, J.P.M., *The Labour College Movement*, London: , 1979. See also Macintyre, Stuart. *A Proletarian Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

¹⁵ Compare McIlroy, John. “The demise of the National Council of Labour Colleges.” In *The Search for Enlightenment* edited by Brian Simon. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990 with Holford, John. *Union Education in Britain: A TUC Activity*. Nottingham: Department of Adult Continuing Education, 1994.

go on to influence a generation of researchers intent on ‘rescuing’ alternative working class traditions that were portrayed as indelibly engrained in British society.¹⁶

Educational initiatives were part of wider movements capable of transformation in their own time; they were not portrayed as well-intentioned forerunners of a contemporary educational framework. This strand of historical writing would also emphasise a conception of past and present in which previous historical moments could be juxtaposed to the present in creative ways that also implied alternative futures were possible.

Despite the richness and quality of this work, the key distinction between radical and liberal education has a tendency to blur in today’s climate where both of these approaches could be portrayed as anachronistic. Recent work has also argued that the division between the WEA and ‘independent’ forms of working class adult education may have been over-played; antagonisms about curriculum and subservience to the state also deflected issues of competing for similar students.¹⁷ It has proved difficult to draw any direct correlation between education in the WEA and political alignment.¹⁸ Similarly, it may also be true that those involved in independent working class education received a more ‘rounded’ liberal education beyond confines of the class struggle. For instance, novelists such as Lewis Jones and Harold Heslop were nurtured as students in the CLC and intellectuals such as AJP Taylor and Harold

¹⁶ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, orig. 1963.

¹⁷ Brown, Geoff. “Independence and Incorporation: the Labour College Movement and the Workers’ Educational Association Before the Second World War.” In *Adult Education for a Change*, edited by Jane L. Thompson. London: Hutchinson, 1980, 109-125.

¹⁸ Rose, Jonathon. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Laski were both tutors at the NCLC.¹⁹ Famously GDH Cole attempted to bridge both liberal and independent working class education and RH Tawney, an icon of ‘liberal education’, was a complex character who was aware that social and political movements were primary factors in explaining educational change.²⁰ Thus there is a need to be aware of the fluidity between ‘ways of struggle’ and ‘ways of life’,²¹ which, from a contemporary perspective, appear to overlap. Whilst one strategy may have made sense at one moment, it may have spilled over into another in a different context.

Furthermore, Cole and Tawney also reveal the complexity of middle class responses to adult education. While working class education has been represented as a quest for independence, experiences were often enriched by the encounter of middle and working class people across the class divide in which mutual learning took place. Middle class supporters could show great sensitivity and understanding which, in turn, fostered greater independence.²²

By analysing the work of particular working class movements, familiar dichotomies have a tendency to break down, not only those between liberal and radical education but also between vocational and non-vocational education as well as public and

¹⁹ McIlroy, John. “Independent Working Class Education and Trade Union Education and Training”. In *A History of Modern British Adult Education* edited by Roger Fieldhouse. Leicester: NIACE, 1996, 264.

²⁰ Tawney, R.H. “Adult Education in the History of the Nation”. Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference of the History of the British Institute of Adult Education, 1926, quoted in Keith Jackson. Preface to Thompson, *Adult Education...*, 14.

²¹ See E.P. Thompson’s review of Raymond Williams’ early work, “The Long Revolution, Parts 1 & 2,” *New Left Review*, 9–10 (1961): 24–33, and 34–39.

²² Rowbotham, Sheila “Travellers in a strange country.” In *Threads Through Time*. Edited by S. Rowbotham. London: Penguin, 1999, 260-301. Goldman, Lawrence. *Dons and Workers*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995 and “Intellectuals and the English working class, 1870-1945.” *History of Education* 29, no 4 (2000): 281-300.

voluntary provision. As Roger Fieldhouse has noted, these dichotomies between ‘might more usefully have been treated as different but not opposite positions along the continuum of adult education’.²³ For instance, the educational work of the co-operative movement engaged with the state but was also at times fiercely independent.²⁴ The co-op linked practical training to general forms of education in ways that may turn out to challenge the division between vocational and non-vocational education. Indeed, co-operatives and other self-help organisations such as friendly societies were themselves built upon entrepreneurial understanding and skills.²⁵ The co-op was also a forum in which the activism and learning of women can be analysed, especially in the work of the Women’s Co-operative Guild although this has not always been framed in educational terms.²⁶ Despite the fact that the movement was at the forefront of many educational developments, it is surprising to find that there are no in-depth studies of co-operative education in the way there are for trade unions, the Labour Party and early socialists.²⁷

Although the co-op was predominantly a working class movement it also generated ambiguous class messages in comparison with other class based movements. The concept of class was stretched to encompass such historical variety and later

²³ Fieldhouse, *History...* 399.

²⁴ Some educational aspects of the movement can be found in Peter Gurney, Peter. *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England 1870-1930*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, chs 2 and 3. Attfield, J. *With Light of Knowledge: a Hundred Years of Education in RACS, 1877-1977*. London: RACS/Journeyman, 1981. MacPherson, Ian and Stephen Yeo. *Pioneers of Co-operation*. Manchester: Co-operative College, 2005.

²⁵ Woodin, Tom, “Exploring Themes in the History of Co-operative Education.” Paper presented to Institute of Historical Research, London, March 2005.

²⁶ For instance, Scott, Gillian, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1998.

²⁷ Griggs, Clive. *The Trades Union Congress and the Struggle for Education 1868-1925*. Barcombe: Falmer, 1983. *The TUC and Educational Reform 1926-1970*. London: Woburn Press, 2002. Dennis Lawton. *Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900-2001 and Beyond*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004. Manton, Kevin. *Socialism and Education in Britain 1883-1902*. London: Woburn.

generations would begin to question the ubiquitous nature of the concept. For instance, from the 1970s an increasing range of voices became uneasy that historical understandings of class had been too unitary and homogenous and implied overly-deterministic models of social change. Richard Johnson returned to similar material worked on by EP Thompson and found evidence of the ‘really useful knowledge’ that early nineteenth century movements connected to their social emancipation in order to parody the notion of ‘useful knowledge’ favoured by elites. However, contrary to Thompson’s argument, this was not seen as evidence for the formation of the working class, a claim which testified to a broader concern that social class should not simply be applied to an increasing diversity of historical situations.²⁸

Furthermore, feminist historians problematised the fixed categories of the working class which universalised the experiences of white male workers. The work of the Co-operative Women’s Guild is also evidence of the fact that women’s participation in adult education has been highly significant although rarely recognised and much harder to find.²⁹ Jane Martin has shown how the significant role of women like Mary Bridges Adams has been written out of the historical record.³⁰ In addition, the growing formalization of education often led to the increasing marginalization of women in working class communities where their influence is harder to detect³¹ and less easily squared with versions of class based on a male breadwinner. It has also been argued that ‘heroic’ and ‘romantic’ accounts of the male working class are less

²⁸ Johnson, Richard. “Really Useful Knowledge.” In *Working Class Culture* edited by J. Clarke et al. London: Hutchinson, 1979.

²⁹ For a recent example see Munby, Zoe. *Raising Our Voices. One Hundred Years of Women in the WEA*. Barton on Humber: WEA, 2003.

³⁰ Martin, Jane. “Contesting Knowledge: Mary Bridges Adams and the Workers’ Education Movement, 1900-1918”. In *Gender, Colonialism and Education*, edited by J. Goodman and J. Martin. London, Woburn Press, 2002, 124-147.

³¹ Thompson, Dorothy. ‘Women and Nineteenth Century Radical Politics: A Lost Dimension’ in *Outsiders. Class, Gender and Nation*. London: Verso, 1993. Also Vincent, *Literacy...*

applicable to women.³² Despite significant studies which have focussed on the development of the private and public and on contested forms of femininity,³³ working class women's education remains an area with huge historical potential. Similarly the histories of immigrant and minority ethnic communities are waiting to be written in relation to a number of educational and cultural movements and campaigns in this country as well as in former colonies.³⁴ In comparison with the weight of historical work, race and gender remain under-utilised concepts and it seems likely that accounts of working class education in the future will be more marked by notions of masculinity and whiteness. For instance, gendered and racialised debates on whether working class and colonial subjects were capable of being educated and 'civilised', and so earn the right to participate politically, were at the heart of Victorian society and empire. Similar educational issues also informed debates on slavery and empire.³⁵

Changing perspectives

These challenges to class in historical study have been coterminous with the transformations alluded to at the beginning of this paper. 'Traditional' labour movements have declined and transformed themselves in the face of increasingly

³² For instance, Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Swindells, Julia and Lisa Jardine. *What's Left?* London: Routledge. Steedman, Carolyn. "The Price of Experience: Women and the Making of the English Working Class". *Radical History Review* 59 (1994): 108-119.

³³ For instance, Dyhouse, Carol. *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. London: Routledge, 1981. Taylor, Barbara. *Eve and the New Jerusalem*. London: Virago, 1983. Purvis, June. *Hard Lessons*. Cambridge: Polity, 1989. *A History of Women's Education in England*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991. Martin, J. and J. Goodman. *Women and Education 1800-1980*. London: Palgrave, 2004.

³⁴ For instance, Walmsley, Anne. *The Caribbean Artists Movement*. London: New Beacon Books, 1992.

³⁵ For instance, Hall, Catherine. *White, Male and Middle Class*. Cambridge: Polity, 1992. Hall, C., K. McClelland and J. Rendall. *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000. On slavery in the Caribbean see Blouet, Olwyn Mary. "Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies, 1823-33: The Role of Education". *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no 4 (Winter 1990): 625-643.

complex, fragmented and contradictory identities.³⁶ As a result the frameworks to study working class education have altered considerably. In 1961 JFC Harrison could draw a distinction between adult education and the more diffuse education of adults in general.³⁷ However, in the current context where obituaries for the movement have proliferated in recent years, this division has begun to break down. Indeed, in the absence of a contemporary movement to provide meaning and direction to historical study, it has become more difficult to exclude the general arena of adult learning. While researching educational institutions has distinct advantages in terms of definition and clarity such studies can only be enriched by placing them alongside the diverse range of learning processes that may be taking place at any one time. This claim was staked out by Lawrence Cremin and remains an approach which may also help to resuscitate working class education in new ways.

This trend has become increasingly significant in recent years and a broad interest in literacy has surfaced, a focus which considerably widens the study of working class learning and education.³⁸ David Vincent's key introductory work to the historical study of literacy, *Literacy and Popular Culture 1750-1914* focused attention on the myriad uses and purposes to which reading and writing has been put: '...the often discrete categories of education, family, work, popular beliefs, the imagination and politics must be studied together...'³⁹ Vincent also employs quantitative data to

³⁶ For different approaches see Rowbotham, S., L. Segal and H. Wainwright. *Beyond the Fragments*. London: Merlin, 1980. Jacques, M. and Mulhern, F. *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* London: Verso, 1981.

³⁷ Harrison, *Learning...* xiv

³⁸ In part influenced by contemporary movements in adult literacy which pointed to the absence of such practices in the past. See Hamilton, Mary. "Literacy and Basic Education." In Fieldhouse, *History*. Hamilton, M. and Y. Hillier. *Changing Faces of Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy. A Critical History*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 2006. Woodin, Tom. "'A Beginner Reader is not a Beginner Thinker'. Student Publishing Since the 1970s". *Pedagogica Historica* (forthcoming.).

³⁹ David Vincent. *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914*. Cambridge: CUP, 1989, preface and 15.

provide a longer term account of change giving due prominence to wider social forces in stimulating and directing literacy practices. For instance, he examined the role of the state in channelling the development of literacy through a universal postal system. His account attempts to capture both the overall transformation from orality to literacy as well as some of the subjective nuances of such transitions.

The meanings and contradictions apparent within these wider accounts of change have also offered new perspectives on working class education. Indeed, writing about adult education has suffered from too great a focus on national debates and structures rather than the experience of learning in a wider cultural context. One means of addressing this issue has been through an analysis of the written works of working class people themselves. Although limited in number these significant autobiographies allow us to follow the trajectories of individual lives as they make sense of the world, albeit from a perspective later in life.⁴⁰ In addition, historians of reading have developed studies which construct accounts of the cultural experience of learning. Jonathon Rose's *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, which aimed to provide 'a more representative portrait of the working class as a whole', examined how working class people avidly read 'classic' literature not as a symbol of class oppression but for their own reasons. Rose's focus on the individual is driven by his desire to 'step outside' the collective modes traditionally occupied by labour historians. He warns of the 'ideology' implicit in 'Marxism, feminism, Christianity,

⁴⁰ Burnett, John. *Useful Toil*. London: Allen Lane, 1974. Burnett, John, D. Vincent, and D. Mayall. *The Autobiography of the Working Classes*. 3 vols, 1790-1900, 1900-1945, Supplement 1790-1945. Brighton: Harvester, 1984, 1987, 1989. Vincent, David. *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*. London: Europa, 1981; *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Howard, Ursula. "Self-education and Writing in Nineteenth Century English Communities." In *Writing in the Community*, edited by D. Barton and R. Ivancic. London: Sage, 1991, 78-108.

Islam, liberalism, the traditional British class structure, or any other intellectual system...’ and emphasises the need to return to the reception and lived meanings of such collective forms.⁴¹

These accounts of literacy can be further enriched by a greater awareness of subjectivity and the cultural creation of working people. For example, the literature on working class writing is still quite separate from that on education, reading and autobiography.⁴² Writers are not just readers who tell us about their society, learning and cultural consumption, they also speak for themselves and are engaged in cultural creation. There is a dilemma between viewing working class writing as a window into wider social experiences on the one hand and as an attempt to construct new meaning on the other. Despite the growing recognition of ‘interior development’ this remains an area with considerable potential.⁴³ Although poverty and immersion in a community made it difficult to plumb the depths of individual selfhood,⁴⁴ nevertheless we can at least identify subjective differences in working class expression. For the nineteenth century Regina Gagnier and Julia Swindells have explored some of the narrative strategies which writers adopted and, at times, were forced to adapt.⁴⁵ These

⁴¹ Rose, *Intellectual Life.*, 8. Rose built on earlier studies, notably Altick, Richard D. *The English Common Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957. See also Webb, R.K.. *The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955. David Vincent asserts that this approach may involve a methodological arbitrariness see Vincent, David. “The Progress of Literacy.” *Victorian Studies* (Spring 2003), 405-431. For claims that Rose underestimated working class sympathy for modernism see Christopher Hilliard. “Modernism and the Common Writer.” *The Historical Journal* 48, no 3 (2005): 769-797.

⁴² Examples include Ashraf, PM. *Introduction to Working Class Literature in Great Britain*. Berlin (GDR), 1979. Maidment, Brian. *The Poorhouse Fugitives*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1987. Haywood, Ian. *Working Class Fiction from Chartism to Trainspotting*. Plymouth: British Council, 1997. Kirk, John. *Twentieth Century Writing and the British Working Class*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003. Neuberger, Victor E. *Popular Literature. A History and Guide*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

⁴³ Ibid, 19. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom and Autobiography...* Burnett, *Useful Toil*.

⁴⁴ Rowbotham, Sheila. “‘Shush Mum’s Writing’? Personal Narratives by Working Class Women in the Early Days of British Women’s History”. *Socialist History* 17, 2000.

⁴⁵ Swindells, Julia (1985) *Victorian Writing and Working Women*. Cambridge: Polity. Gagnier, Regina *Subjectivities*. Oxford: OUP, 1991.

approaches may have some common ground with sociological work which has argued for an exploration of the ways in which working class people were individualised.⁴⁶ Thus it may be possible to re-read the history of working class educational institutions in terms of how they contributed to a sense of working class subjectivity among participants.

By 'moving beyond' the labour movement in these various ways it is unsurprising that the agency of subordinate groups has been harder to detect in some of these accounts. In part this also arises from the nature and assumptions of such histories of social transformation. For instance, long-term objective accounts of change necessarily focus on dominant forces although, in doing so, they may also demote self-conscious workers and their movements to well-demarcated spaces outside of which they have a limited impact. Conversely, the more detailed subjective accounts may underplay the relations between the individual and wider social structures and movements. Thus there is a possibility that the agency of working class people seeps away between the cracks of these two approaches.

Commitment, experience and social change

Previously many historians were bolstered by the existence of a working class movement and its connections to adult education. It provided a context and an audience for historical work. However, as the institutional representations of these movements have weakened and changed it is a good time to re-assess this body of work.

⁴⁶ Savage, Mike. *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

One limitation of this work is the claim that the self-educated have always been a minority. Some identified a 'labour aristocracy' in the late Victorian period and others have suspected the self-educated working class may have been 'stupefiers' rather than enablers, of a wider cultural participation.⁴⁷ Indeed, building working class forms of protest and self-help often necessitated skills and ways of working that conflicted with earlier forms of popular expression but were in tune with those favoured by the middle classes.⁴⁸ These claims need to be evaluated through an analysis of the roles this minority played and an awareness that similar activities may carry quite divergent meanings when refracted through the prism of social class. At different times those who were 'self-educated' may have been more numerous and actively engaged in wider communities than at other times; they might also have been quite a varied group in terms of their social composition and outlook. The focus on learning may also help to widen our lens beyond institutional and organisational boundaries.

Despite their often modest size, alternative educational cultures have been significant as sources of inventiveness and creativity – a sort of educational avant garde. For instance, the formation of cultural studies emerged from a growing ferment within adult education and an engagement between tutors and students.⁴⁹ Lawrence Goldman outlines the value of late nineteenth/early twentieth century Oxford not just for working class students but also for the university which was able to develop ideas for new courses from its extra-mural work whilst avoiding wider reforms. In fact working

⁴⁷ Barrow, Logie *Independent Spirits. Spiritualism and the English Plebeians 1850-1910*. London: Routledge, 1986. Also Harrison, *Learning*, xiv

⁴⁸ Vincent, *Literacy*, 20.

⁴⁹ Steele, Tom. *The Emergence of Cultural Studies: Adult Education, Cultural Politics and the English Question*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997.

class educational forms were one factor in the development of the post 1945 Labour Government – many MPs and even ministers could trace educational roots in the WEA and other initiatives of the labour movement. Thus, an issue which continually needs to be unraveled is how far alternative initiatives have served as seedbeds of mainstream activity and how far these new ideas have been only partially acted upon or transmogrified into practices which appear as alien to the original constituency.

Although there is a familiar pattern of innovative working class initiatives gradually losing their radical edge as they become incorporated into existing forms, histories of working class institutions remain valuable as examples of how significant organisations were constructed out of transient activities during a time of social dislocation. Such initiatives may survive for many years and persist even longer as memory. Whilst power and resources play a considerable role in the ‘invention of tradition’, for subordinate groups experience and memory tend to take on greater significance. This can prove difficult given that experience cannot simply be passed on but has to be re-learnt in new conditions. If we view tradition as an amalgamation of discontinuous moments that require continual remoulding rather than an unchanging and common practice that is passed on directly through the generations, such experiences can be seen to inhabit overlapping universes out of which traditions are capable of being formed.⁵⁰ It may also be possible to identify continuing impulses to learn and express among subordinate groups.⁵¹ For instance, in the 1970s the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers would foster diverse forms of working class expression through writing and publishing groups. With the

⁵⁰ See Hobsbawm, E. and T. Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Woodin, ‘More Writing...’

⁵¹ For one example see Fryer, Bob. “The Challenge to Working Class Education”. In Simon, *Search*, 276-319.

advantage of hindsight, it is possible for us to connect the complaints of nineteenth century editors of the working class press about too much poetry being sent in, with the contemporary profusion of popular poetry.⁵² We should not write off working class education as irrelevant from a modern perspective; it may yet connect with contemporary developments in unexpected ways.

Furthermore, many of these accounts have utilized the notion of experience as a building block for analysis although this dialogue with experience has become less popular in recent years. Critics of the concept have claimed that it essentialises subordinate cultures and falls into pitfalls of representation.⁵³ However, there is no umbilical cord attaching these tendencies to the notion of experience. It can be a way into understanding the contradictions and difficulties of people's lives and is an essential means of understanding those who live on the margins of society. It is more than just a starting point – rather, we must continually return to it and relate to it in constructing argument and theory. Empathy can also be a tool to aid the understanding of meaning and the dilemmas that historical actors faced. This may become more important as historical studies are widened to embrace gender, race, and other markers of inequality such as disability and sexuality. I would question the type of developmental subject histories found in cultural studies where experience is represented as an embarrassing childhood past now best forgotten.⁵⁴ Martin Jay has examined the historical lineage and continuing relevance of the concept with its

⁵² On FWWCP see Woodin, Tom. "Building Culture"; "'More Writing Than Welding': Learning in Worker Writer Groups", *History of Education* 39, no 5 (2005): 551-67. "'Chuck Out The Teacher: Radical Pedagogy in the Community.'" *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 26, no 1 (2007): 89-104.

⁵³ Scott, Joan Wallach. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17, no 4, (Summer 1991): 773-797. *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

⁵⁴ Pickering, Michael. *History, Experience and Cultural Studies*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1997.

capacity to carry complex meanings and stimulate on-going debate.⁵⁵ As EP Thompson warned some years ago, jettisoning experience may make it easier to construct theories and arguments only to find that experience ‘walks in without knocking at the door’ to make us think again.⁵⁶ Thus, the experience and learning of subordinate groups remains an area from which new understandings of education and social change may yet emerge.

Clearly accounts which take note of these factors will not lead back to a pristine golden age of working class education but point in the direction of more complex and nuanced accounts of class. Although familiar themes and dilemmas may reappear in new guises, the context in which they operate will be fundamentally different than in the past. Class analysis can help to elucidate understanding but, when used to the exclusion of other categories, also to limit our vision. The universality attached to social class has been undermined but this need not prevent the use of class in educational histories. Having said this, class has always been a contested notion and it is not only academics who have recognised its specific, diverse and contingent forms in relation to other categories.⁵⁷ In part the current stasis may be a reflection of the continuing re-constitution of class under capitalism. Our understanding of class has not kept up with the recent seismic shifts implicated in the processes of ‘globalisation’ and, as a result, there may be a corresponding lull in intellectual activity focused on class. In the meantime our conceptual repertoire will continue to be considerably weakened by the absence of class until we learn to reinvigorate and adapt it to make sense of the past from new perspectives.

⁵⁵ Jay, Martin. *Songs of Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

⁵⁶ Thompson, E.P. *Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Merlin Press, 1978, 201.

⁵⁷ Woodin, Tom. “Muddying the Waters: Class and Identity in a Working Class Cultural Organisation.” *Sociology* 39, no 5 (2005): 1001-1018.

Biographical note

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