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Adult Learning and the Challenge of Social and Cultural Diversity:

diverse lives, learning and literacies

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A film as a source for the history of adult education

The film, a documentary entitled “*Retour à l’école ?*” (Return to school?), is built on interviews of participants in evening classes. They were asked to express the way how they lived this experience as adult learners. Shot in different locations, this film lets people speak of their motivations, their plans, and also their difficulties in daily life. But what is very interesting is the place accorded to their wives. Actually, what is noticeable is that all adult learners interviewed are men. Three of them accepted to be filmed at home with their wives and they described their educational career as a family shared project.

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This paper will present a research work in progress on a 45’ black and white documentary film shot in 1966 in an adult education institution, the CUCES¹ of Nancy (France). Entitled *Retour à l’école ?* (Return to school?), it was produced by the Research service of the ORTF² which was the unique television body in France in the sixties. It was not designed as an entertainment but as a pedagogic document that should open to a debate in the framework of educational seminars held on week ends for the evening class teachers and trainers.

¹ Centre universitaire de coopération économique et sociale (University centre of social and economical cooperation)

² Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française

Built on interviews of the CUCES social promotion courses listeners³ and shot in different locations, working places, a class room or family flats; this film describes these workers motivations and their hopes in their learning plans, but also their day to day difficulties.

The approach that was chosen to deal with these questions is clearly psycho sociologist. The main theme of this film can be read between the lines of the discourse upon the school and the promotion at work. Although it is never named as such it will be identified and analysed as a thinking on the “*Rapport au savoir*” (‘*relationship to knowledge*’⁴) at the precise moment when this expression emerged in the French scientific literature (Beillerot, 1987) and in the writings produced by the adult education institutions of Nancy (Laot, 1999). A very particular place is given to women in this film. None of them are listeners or even possible participant in a training course. On the other hand, listeners’ “spouses” play a forefront part in it. The authors of the film developed an implicit theory about them. Because of their specific social role as spouses, they are an essential link in the success or failure in their husband educational career. Furthermore, beyond their social role, as persons (subjects) in front of knowledge, their participation in the training course, *through the intermediary of their husbands*, constituted a fundamental active factor of these workers’ *rapport au savoir* in profound change. The core question will be then analysed as a problematic *couple’s relationship to knowledge* as the result of a learning activity. This paper tends to demonstrate how this question, that may appear rather strange today, is historically significant and relevant to adult educator’s training which rose and developed in the second part of the sixties.

Social promotion in France and in Nancy

We will remind here very shortly that promotion courses extend in some ways the work of adult classes which blossomed in France in the 19th century. However they introduced 2 major shifts. Firstly, the State took place in this arena in a very determined way. Several official texts gave them consistence between 1948 and 1962, and mainly with the 1959 Law of Social promotion. And secondly, for the first time in France with social promotion already at work adults could enter in the University.

³ The members of audience of the evening classes were called « auditeurs »

⁴ This notion appears to be rather close to “one’s way of knowing” as it has been explored in English literature or “personal epistemology” when psychology is not the only underlying reference theory. Berstein and Bourdieu’s “relationship to language” could be considered as one of the sources. However philosophers (with their “relationship to the world”), Foucault and the psychoanalysis (notably Lacan) provide other important roots to this notion which is now widespread in France in the domain of educational sciences.

Social promotion is first called *PST (Promotion supérieure du travail*: “higher work promotion”). A PST programme has been progressively held from 1956 in the CUCES of Nancy, to get three aims:

- a quick education and improvement for supervisory management agents (*agents de maîtrise*), notably upon management problems and upon economical and human relation questions
- graduated technician training, notably upon the organisation of enterprises
- engineering course addressed to “technicians who have enough capacities”

Two programmes were opened in the CUCES, a short one called *Work promotion*, that lasted 2 years and led to no degree; and a long one called *Higher work promotion* that lasted initially 5 years, and then, 6 years, open to the holders of French baccalaureate. It led to a University degree, the DEST⁵, created in 1959. 4 specialities were available: electronic, chemistry, metallurgy and mechanic. The CUCES became what was officially called by decree an IPST⁶ (Higher work promotion Institute) in 1958.

Classes took place out of the working time, on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, at 7 to 9 pm.

Though, these programmes gave no entire satisfaction. The number of registrations remained low in relation to the potentialities of the town of Nancy. And in the other hand, the percentage of giving-up, from 30 to 50% according to the levels, appeared very high. Thus, this activity remained limited. About 20 persons gave lessons. They were teachers in the University or in technical colleges. The board of the CUCES debated on the means to improve these courses, as to increase the number of applicants and on the way of limiting their abandonment.

In 1960, Bertrand Schwartz⁷ became head of the CUCES. He worked to reform in depth the evening classes. Two new aims were defined for the higher work promotion (PST) long programme, the first one concerning the listeners, the second one, at another level, having an economic scope. PST was aimed:

“- to allow each man who hadn’t the chance to continue his studies when he was young, to resume doing studies so as to have access to any function or level in the hierarchy; in one word, to allow him to change social class;

⁵ Diplôme d’études supérieures techniques (Technical bachelor level degree, 2 year studies after the French baccalaureate)

⁶ IPST (Institut de promotion supérieure du travail)

⁷ He was also head of the Ecole des Mines of Nancy (a prestigious engineer school)

- to meet the country needs in engineers and technicians that are not enough numerously educated with current means, thanks to men who combine considerable practice with a minimum of culture gained during some study years in an IPST.”

Bertrand Schwartz demonstrated that the first aim could not be reached. He actually considered that what was demanded to the learners was too hard and he qualified learning conditions as “inhuman”. Foremost he claimed that programmes, class organisation and teaching did not take into account adult specificities of the participants. According to him, classical classes should be banned. Examinations as well as theatre classes were suppressed from the start of the 1960 academic year. Small work groups and self evaluation were organised. “*The only method should be the one utilising everyone participation, small group discussions or seminars*”.

The starting level was lowered. Everywhere else, adult students entered in the PST course after the French baccalaureate, at the CUCES they entered 2 or 3 years before, and then in 1964, a new starting year allowed the entrance just after the *CAP* or the *Certificat d'études* (the end of primary school).

For the first time in France in 1962 was created at the CUCES a “full time year” to replace the two last years of the long programme. The Ministry of education supported this initiative by giving participants financial assistance as to compensate wages.

With all these reforms what became “Social promotion course” numerously and qualitatively developed year after year. It became a research topic for researchers notably the researchers of the INFA (National Institute for Adult Education). From the beginning of the sixties, some works were undertaken upon listeners’ motivation, upon failure causes or upon the way adults learn scientific concepts. In 1966, the year when the film was shot, there was 560 listeners enrolled in Nancy Social promotion course, 37 of whom in the full time year.

A film as a source for history

As source, this film is a first quality document for history. Because it is a film, i.e. made of pictures and sounds, it gives access to pieces of reality that can’t be found elsewhere. The picture points the “*This-has-been*” as R. Barthes emphasizes it concerning photography “*I can’t deny that the thing was here. There is a double linked position: as reality and as past*”⁸ Not any else document can give access to the listeners’ speech *at the moment when they*

⁸ Barthes R. 1980. *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*. Cahier du cinéma – Gallimard Seuil, p. 20

attend their social promotion course. It is *live* speech, not a rebuilt one as it can appear to be through interviews for example. Of course ‘live’ speech must be put into perspective. Indeed the authors, the film director, through the editing choices and through the selected themes strongly influence the speech production. However, all these facts, questions as well as answers, and the logic of the whole set, are interesting for the researcher.

Beyond the produced speech, this film provides rich information on the cultural and social context: the regional and the social class accent of the interviewed listeners; the way sentences are built and the vocabulary used; the noise of the machines in the working places concerning the soundtrack; and, concerning the pictures: the class room in square organisation, the blackboard and the teacher’s chalk, the cigarette in the fingers of the listener or the interviewer’s pipe, family home décors, car models, modern industrial machines, the shape of glasses, haircuts, way of dressing at work, ways of behaving, of greeting a superior in the working place, etc. All information, that Barthes calls *infra-knowledge* to what picture directly gives access through “‘*details*’ that are the very material of ethnological knowledge”, all this give credence that this really was, and that this is no more.

Films bring emotion. This one particularly does. Its authors chose to enter in the intimacy of these persons. It shows little slices of lives, situated between two moments, the moment of the entrance in the learning programme and the moment of the uncertain issue of it. Emotion part is still accentuated by the temporal distance that separates us from the scene. 40 years have passed. Who became these listeners? How old are they today? Did they reach their goals? Did they go all the way? Did they get their degree? What did it give to them? Did they become engineers? Senior management? Or did life hazards make them turn away from their track? Did they be discouraged? What would they think today about their yesterday’s discourse?

Couple’s “relationship to knowledge”

The film deals with several themes. One of them will be particularly examined: the place given to listeners’ spouses. The theme of the impact of conjugal and family life in the learning development is widely explored. 18 minutes of the film are devoted to it, which is 40% of the total duration. The most part of this theme (30% of the total time) is filmed in three different listeners’ private lounge, in the presence of their wife, and for one of them, of his children. It is the most important theme of the film in terms of devoted time and means (shooting locations). This theme is introduced by the interviewer himself, at the ninth minute,

when he replies to a listener who is explaining that he spends many nights, Saturdays, and even sometimes Sundays on his homework : “That’s spouses who are praiseworthy in that case!”. Another listener approves: “Yes, they have to much contribute, spouses! You feel drained all of a sudden, they have to help you”.

Spouses or ‘the spouse’ (general singular) are sometimes an obstacle, as this funny retort may suggest: at the question “Are you married, you too? A listener answers: “Yes, yes, that poses some problems, nevertheless...”. The first listeners’ “fight” takes place, in private, at home. Conciliatory, comprehensive, helping, the spouse has first of all to accept that she will herself be less helped at home (it is noticeable that most of the women mentioned in the film work outside). Domestic task sharing is unbalanced by the evening classes that require much time of study and absence from husbands. This penalizes also children deprived of fathers. “I did not see my husband anymore” tells one of the three interviewed spouses, this one who was tired after the birth of her six children, and who had a “*cracking*” (in English in the text) that lead his husband to stop for a while his course. Conjugal pressure was one of the causes of giving-up evening classes. It was a very wide scale phenomenon that was seriously taken into account in the CUCES and INFA. However more interesting that the question of the absence is this following topic, once more suggested by the interviewer who threw a line: “It’s a little like she followed courses with you?” Next report brings an approval: “She’s participating, oh yes!” So the spouse participated in the course, but how did she? As brake, as incentive, as support or as mirror, several roles shows trough the wives’ discourses. Family discussions about class contents played an essential role in accompanying the modification in the listeners’ relationship to knowledge. So, in the family’s lounge, in presence of his wife, one of them explained: “I try to make her profit from what I learn, you know, from what is supposed to interest her.” Among the studied pieces of knowledge, he chose some. First of all, he spoke about works of painters that were studied in the “general culture class” (“I know that my wife likes the arts”), then he spoke about neutrons, protons nucleons “... as to transmit her, in a more simple way, a simplified way... If she doesn’t understand, too bad, but I’d have talked of it to her”. Thus, this man following a course became his wife’s teacher. He thought indeed that “it is always good to learn something”. In reaction to this not very favourable light thrown on her in front of cameras by her husband (though he seemed totally unaware of it), she continued : “you think also that if I understand it is because you have well explained it to me, and that you also have well understood.” This relevant remark he approved: “Yes, it is a little like a test for me. If my wife understands, it means that I have well understood my lesson.” Thus she restored a kind of balance between them, in front of his developing

knowledge. This listener acknowledged his wife as being a mirror of his own difficulties in learning, however also, of his proud to succeed in it.

A “pedagogical” film

“We did something that had a political dimension. That was not technical pedagogy; that was something that had political and social dimensions” (Alain Bercovitz⁹, the film author interview). Unlike educational TV programme which were produced in the same period by RTS-Pomotion (Radio-Télévision scolaire) and broadcast on French TV by the ORTF, the pedagogical side of the film *Retour à l'école?* is not to be found in its content, but in the way it was exploited: at the end the film invites to a debate between spectators. This film was used that way, in the framework of training of trainer seminaries which was held on week-ends for evening classes teachers. According to Jean-Marie Pechenart, who organised some of these seminaries, the film was utilized as a *projecting surface*, as a way to induce a change in the participant's representations (upon listeners or upon educational relation) and to make them put into questions their own categories. Thus, the film was employed as a change inductor in trainers' behaviour.

Never is it question in the film of educative relation, of the bringing-in of the teachers or of the part of support provided by the institution. The educational system itself is never really questioned. The figure of the adult educator or trainer is totally absent. This film puts into images what was then written: it is adults who are educating themselves. Through this collection of biographical fragments, participants in training of trainer seminaries discover an audience upon which they have many to learn. “Adult educators should be people capable to gain knowledge upon each of their students such as to understand for each of them what can be a favourable factor or a block point in his learning” wrote Guy Lajoinie in October 1966 (2 months before the film shot) in a paper on “The Roles of the Adult Educator” within the framework of a CUCES training conference.

Trainers had always many to recognize through their students, as adults, as people involved in an educational life, and as subjects of a changing way of knowing... It is what this film permits, by closely interesting in what people live, echoing their emotions, appealing to a comprehensive attitude, and then, opening to a discussion.

Rapport au savoir and collective promotion

⁹ Alain Bercovitz, Jean-Marie Pechenart and Guy Lajoinie who are cited in the paper were members of the CUCES. I interviewed them in the framework of this research work.

Alain Bercovitz confirms that the idea that the content of the course addressed not only the individuals but their entourage was discussed within the CUCES. It was also put into practice through different initiatives, for instance, evening conferences which were open to the whole family. According to Jean-Marie Pechenart who held it, the first of these open conferences took place in the great hall of the Ecole des Mines on the theme: Industrial Aesthetic, and had a capacity audience at the great surprise of both its detractors who had had laugh at it, and of its promoters who did not expect such a success (interview with Jean-Marie Pechenart). For all the leaders of the CUCES, the whole “milieu” should be involved in the course. Not only was the family support necessary to help the listeners to stand, but else, if wives were not involved in the process, then the cultural change and the declassification that it brought to them (according to their husband’s eyes) would make the conjugal communication uneasy to maintain. At any rate, there would be a break: in the educational career or in the couple. Promotion thus had to be collective (familial) thanks to a linked and shared evolution in the couple’s way of knowing.

In conclusion

Since the sixties, ways of thinking adult education and promotion has changed from collective to individual. In this film the collective conception of promotion is narrowed to the couple or the family, however, in other initiatives of the CUCES, the “milieu” was broader, widened to the industrial field (mineral basin) or the labour pool. Today, the way to consider adult education and training quite only linked to the notion of individual employability has lead us to forget the collective dimension that was then a fundamental basis of educational actions. Furthermore, the main topic of the film looks very strange today because of the change that has occurred in the gender roles. After 1968 in France, mentalities and the society changed. The look at women’s work was modified. Women also became possible learners of promotion courses. Statistics of the CUCES show that before 1968 women were quite absent from Social promotion course registration. They represent 2% of the listeners in 1968/1969, then 6% in 1969/1970 and 16% in 1970/1971. And yet, the question raised in the film is not so absurd if we don’t consider the role distribution between husbands and wives. It puts forward the question of the effects of a learning process - as changing one’s relationship to knowledge (or way of knowing) - on couple relations. This remains a relevant question although today rather little studied. One of the reasons could be found in the fact that psycho sociologist approaches have progressively lost their predominance in the research field on adult education now mostly dominated by economical and managerial approaches.

