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ORIGINAL PAPER

The misuses of sustainability: Adult education, citizenship and the dead hand of neoliberalism

John Holford[1]

Abstract "Sustainability" has a captivating but disingenuous simplicity: its meanings are complex, and have political and policy significance. Exploring the application of the term to adult education, this paper argues that a particular discourse of "sustainability" has become a common-sense, short-circuiting critical analysis and understanding of policy options. This "business discourse" of sustainability, strongly influenced by neoliberal ideas, encourages the presumption that educational programmes and movements which have died out were unsustainable, bound to fail, and even responsible – having failed to adapt – for their own demise. Potentially valuable experience is thus excluded from the educational policy canon. The author uses three cases from 20th-century adult education, namely (1) English liberal adult education; (2) "mass education", also known as community development, in the British colonies; and (3) UNESCO's Fundamental Education, to challenge this presumption. He demonstrates for each case how a business discourse has implied their "unsustainability", but that the reality was more complex and involved external political intervention.

Keywords Adult education · Sustainability · Citizenship · 20th century · History of adult education

Résumé Interprétations erronées de la pérennité : éducation des adultes, citoyenneté et carcan du néolibéralisme – La « pérennité » est d'une simplicité fascinante mais fallacieuse : ses interprétations sont complexes et ont une signification politique et stratégique. En explorant l'application du terme à l'éducation des adultes, l'auteur avance qu'un discours particulier sur la « pérennité » constitue une analyse

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critique et une conception des options stratégiques qui sont quelconques et réductrices. Ce « discours commercial » sur la pérennité, fortement influencé par les idées néolibérales, favorise la supposition que les programmes et mouvements éducatifs qui ont disparu seraient non durables, voués à l'échec et même responsables de leur disparition puisqu'ils n'ont pas réussi à s'adapter. Des expériences potentiellement précieuses sont ainsi exclues du canon des politiques éducatives. Pour contester cette hypothèse, l'auteur s'appuie sur trois cas d'éducation des adultes au XXe siècle, à savoir (1) l'éducation des adultes libérale britannique, (2) l'éducation « de masse » dans les colonies britanniques, connue aussi sous le terme de développement communautaire, et (3) l'éducation fondamentale de l'UNESCO. Il démontre pour chaque cas qu'un discours commercial a induit sa « non-pérennité », mais que la réalité était plus complexe et impliquait une intervention politique externe.

Introduction

How are we to explain the decline, often to the point of extinction, of what in the 20th century was known as "adult education"? This is, of course, one of those questions which requires greater precision: across the world, adults continue to engage in education of many kinds. So let me add: I am referring here to a particular genus of adult education which achieved an ascendancy during the years from the Second World War until (roughly) the 1970s, and was strongly associated with ideas of democratic citizenship.

In this paper I shall examine three examples: three species, as it were, of this genus. They differed, but they shared a common ancestry and many common features. They were, first, the form of liberal adult education that dominated in England through most of the 20th century: the species represented by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and university "extra-mural" education, and of which men such as Albert Mansbridge, R. H. Tawney and Harold Wiltshire are classic exemplars.[1] The second was the type of community development (sometimes known as "mass education") promoted in the British colonies from the mid-1940s until the end of empire. The third was "Fundamental Education", as promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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[1] Albert Mansbridge (1876–1952), the son of a carpenter, left school at 14 becoming a pioneer of adult education in Britain. He was central to founding the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in 1903, the Seafarers' Education Service (1919), the World Association for Adult Education (1918), and the British Institute of Adult Education (1921), and a member of many official and semi-offical committees, including the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee. R. H. Tawney (1880–1962) studied Classics at Oxford, became involved in early WEA through working at Toynbee Hall in the East End of London and taught the first Oxford extra-mural "tutorial classes" from 1908. He later became Professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics and was President of the WEA (1928–44). A leading British historian and social critic, his works include *The Acquisitive Society* (1921), *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), and *Equality* (1931). Harold Wiltshire (1909–1993) was Professor of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham, a leading advocate of the WEA, and a key figure in planning the Open University (which opened in 1969).

(UNESCO) from 1947 until the late 1950s – particularly under the leadership of Julian Huxley and Jaime Torres Bodet.[2]

Why focus on these three examples? They were, I suggest, profoundly important forms of education which valued the sustainability of human coexistence. Their demise has impoverished both contemporary education and the social and democratic life of communities at all levels – local, national and global. They require serious and informed historical investigation. However, I also argue that the notion of "sustainability" (and its complement, unsustainability) currently provides an ideologically powerful, yet intellectually shoddy, excuse for consigning them willy-nilly to the "rubbish-bin of history". My case is that the *fact* that an institution or project or form of provision has not survived – was not sustained – has been taken as proof that it was unsustainable – could not have been sustained: that its demise was *inevitable*.

The three cases I discuss are not, of course, the only kinds of adult education to have emphasised democracy and the sustainability of human communities. The work of UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), the International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), and the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) bear testimony to the continuing significance of such approaches. But – as the first *Global Report on Adult Learning* (UIL 2009) pointed out – "community-based political and cultural traditions of adult education" have been widely displaced since the 1960s by adult education policies framed "within the notion of human capital [and] … developed, either solely or partly, on principles of instrumental rationality that consider the outcomes of learning primarily in terms of use-value" – often, and most narrowly, use-value to competitive economies (ibid., p. 22). In this environment, "what works" or "best practice" – so often the apotheosis of policy debate today – becomes a recipe for uncritical reproduction of the morally dubious. I argue for the examination of what has *not* survived: and *why* it has not. By so doing, I suggest, we can not only begin to re-appropriate forms of education created in more democratic times, and for better purposes, but also provide a deeper understanding of how such approaches have been suppressed or driven to the margins.

Sustainability and the common sense of our time

This equation of non-survival with unsustainability is, of course, a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing issue. Over a century ago, Tawney drew attention to the "common view of social development" that "treats the fact that events have followed a certain course as in itself an indication that no other course was possible" (Tawney 1912, p. 177). This "common view" is, I suggest, normally ideological, in the sense that it rests on explanations based on the "common-sense" assumptions of the time when they are made (Gramsci 1971, pp. 196–198) – rather than on critical

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[2] British evolutionary biologist and humanist Julian Huxley was UNESCO's first Director-General (in office 1946–1948). He was succeeded by Mexican writer, literacy campaigner and politician Jaime Torres Bodet (in office 1948–1952).

understanding. But it is also ideological in two other important respects: first, this common sense is the framework which provides "reasonable", indeed convincing, accounts of why things turned out the way they did. And second, it serves to reinforce the common-sense assumptions themselves: by explaining the way things are – and by providing plausible accounts of why alternatives were unrealistic, and failed – they reinforce the explanatory framework itself.

The "common sense" of the early 21st-century West has widely been labelled "neoliberal". Neoliberalism is

> a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey 2007, p. 2).

As geographer and social theorist David Harvey further noted, neoliberalism has had "pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (ibid., p. 3). There has

> everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s …. [A]dvocates of the neoliberal way now occupy positions of considerable influence in education (the universities and many "think tanks"), in the media, in corporate boardrooms and financial institutions, in key state institutions (treasury departments, the central banks), and also in those international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) that regulate global finance and trade. Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse … (ibid., pp. 2–3).

In this light, it is hardly surprising that neoliberal assumptions have come to pervade even the notion of "sustainability". Elena Giovannoni and Giacomo Fabietti (2014), reviewing the concept of sustainability, identified "three main discourses". There is the "environmental discourse", linked to the conservation of natural resources – "sustainable development" and the like. There is a social discourse, which they associate with "themes such as poverty, health and discrimination" – they mention as examples the Millennium Development Goals and the notion of "corporate social responsibility". But there is also the "business discourse". While this "concerns the relationships between modern corporations and both social and environmental matters", they point out that "from a business perspective, sustainability has been referred to as the capability of a corporation to last in time, both in terms of profitability, productivity and financial performance, as well as in terms of managing environmental and social assets that compose its capitals". In sum, "business sustainability is the *business of staying in business*" (ibid., p. 27; emphasis in original). This usage reduces the concept of sustainability to the emptiest of shells: it means little more than the capacity of a business organisation

to remain in existence. And since the environment in which late 20th- and early 21st-century businesses survive or fail is one of highly globalised and relatively free markets, this business discourse has been shot through with neoliberal assumptions.

This "business" usage is by no means confined to corporations. It is now widespread in the public sector. Let us take, for instance, the area of higher education. There is, of course, high-profile work on higher education's role in environmental sustainability (e.g. Barlett and Chase 2013; Barth 2015; Cullingford and Blewitt 2004). But this obscures the pervasiveness of the "business" discourse. Thus the report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) entitled *On the Edge: Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (OECD 2004) was in fact about "the financial sustainability of universities and other institutions of higher education" which had "become an issue for policy makers, and for those who govern and manage these institutions" (ibid., p. 4). A recent English Higher Education Funding Council report aimed to help "all providers" of higher education (HE) courses "give robust assurances on the quality and sustainability of their offer" (HEFCE 2015, p. 2). Carroll Graham (2010, p. 213) applies the notion to human resources, exploring "the contribution of [universities'] general staff to … their institutions' organisational sustainability". Lynette Swift (2012, p. 259) examines "approaches to determining the financial viability of academic programmes as a critical component of assessing a programme's overall sustainability". In this reduced, "business" shape, the concept has been deployed across many other areas of institutional activity: thus we have "sustainable feedback" (Carless et al. 2010), "sustainable university-wide fieldwork education" (Trede 2010), "sustainable widening participation" (Reed et al. 2015), and sustainable "retention and attrition strategies" (Maher and Macallister 2013).

Neoliberal globalisation may be the common sense of our time; but it is, of course, *only* the common sense of *our* time. All-pervasive as such ideologies seem while they are dominant, they rise and fall. Fifty years ago, for instance, the historian E.H. Carr wrote:

> Down to 1914 belief in objective laws, which governed the economic behaviour of men and nations, and which they could defy only to their own detriment, was still virtually unchallenged … As late as 1930, when the Great Depression set in, this was still the dominant view … Today [1961] … this illusion is dissolved … Everyone knows today that the price of oil or soap does not vary in response to some objective law of supply and demand. Everyone knows, or thinks he knows, that slumps and unemployment are man-made: governments admit, indeed claim, that they know how to cure them. The transition has been made from laissez-faire to planning, from the unconscious to the self-conscious, from belief in objective economic laws to belief that man by his own action can be the master of his economic destiny (Carr 1964, pp. 140–141).

For Carr, this "transition from submission to objective economic laws which, though supposedly rational, were beyond man's control to belief in the capacity of man to control his economic destiny by conscious action" represented "an advance in the application of reason to human affairs, an increased capacity in man to

understand and master himself and his environment", which he declared himself "prepared, if necessary, to call by the old-fashioned name of progress" (ibid., p. 141).

I draw attention to Carr's comments for two reasons. First, he says something about the transience, the historically temporary nature, of ideologies – and also about how permanent, natural and rational they seem at the time. (In the 1950s and 1960s it was Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek and their supporters, not the followers of John Maynard Keynes, who were on the economic "lunatic fringe".)[3] Second, however, Carr's comments that "the application of reason to human affairs" was part of "progress", that economic policy had "been incorporated in social policy" (Carr 1964, p. 141), were very much the mainstream during the mid-20th century, and it was precisely around this time – when they seemed common sense – that the educational movements I discuss below were at their height.

English liberal adult education

The story of English liberal adult education has been often told. In a nutshell, it began in the decade before the First World War, initiated by a group of working-class men and women who soon gained the support of some youngish academics, largely from Oxford. They developed a critique of university "extension" as it then existed (chiefly in the form of lectures in provincial towns and cities), developed new modes of study (pre-eminently, the "tutorial class" in which adult students committed themselves to serious study and writing over three years in a small group, and involving discussion as well as lectures), and had a strong commitment to democratic methods (in decision-making about the curriculum, in the conduct of classes, and in society as a whole). Within a few years they had won support – rhetorical, organisational and financial – from universities and government. Universities across England developed structures which allowed for joint decision-making with voluntary organisations – especially the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) – and, from the early 1920s, established "extra-mural" departments with dedicated adult educational staff. What soon came to be referred to as the tutorial class or workers' education "movement" had strong links with

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[3] Milton Friedman (1912–2006) was Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, and a leading advocate of free markets, a minimal state, and tight control of the money supply – what became known in the 1970s as "monetarism". His works included *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and, with Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (1980). Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), was an Austrian, later British, economist and philosopher. A lifelong advocate of classical liberalism, and opponent of all forms of socialism, his most famous work is *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). He played a key role in developing the Mont Pèlerin Society, a libertarian "think tank" often seen as a key player in establishing the dominance of neoliberal theory and ideology. Hayek was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize for Economics in 1974, Friedman in 1976. John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) was a British economist and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, whose *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) provided the theoretical basis for "mixed-economy" state intervention to address unemployment in the 1930s. He was a key actor in the Bretton Woods conference (1944) which set the framework for the post-war international ecoonomic order.

organised labour: trade unions and the co-operative movement in particular, but also with the then-emerging Labour Party.

The first tutorial class in England was held in 1908 (Goldman 2013, p. 63). Early growth was rapid. Government reports recorded 155 tutorial classes in 1914/15 (Smith 1919, p. 191), 660 in 1937/38, and 772 in 1948/49 (Ashby 1954, p. 16). The movement had what today might be called "spin-offs": one-year classes and shorter courses (of which there were 818 and 1,851 respectively in 1948/49), summer schools, weekend schools, day-schools, and the like. After the mid-1950s, the growth in tutorial classes came to an end (there were 694 in 1969/70), but including the spin-offs, the total number of courses was 11,649 (1969/70), with 249,136 students; they were supported by 380 full-time – and many thousands of part-time – teaching staff (Russell 1973, pp. 218–219). The students in this type of liberal adult education represented around one-eighth of the total number of adults (aged 21 and over) engaged in some form of education (ibid., p. 240). The subject-matter was varied: the first tutorial classes (taught by Tawney in 1908) were on "The Social and Industrial History of England, with Special Attention the the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" (Goldman 2013, p. 64); in 1911–1912, 81 of the 102 tutorial classes listed by Mansbridge (1913, pp. 180–184) were in Economics or Economic History, with many of the remainder being in Sociology, Political Theory and Philosophy. By the early 1970s "nearly half" of all grant-aided university extra-mural courses were "concerned with the traditional humanities (archaeology, history, literature, philosophy and appreciation of the arts)", while science accounted for 13.4 per cent of all classes, and "economics, industrial studies and social studies for another 21 per cent" (Russell 1973, p. 35).

What was the essence of this form of education? Of course it varied over time. In the 1950s, Harold Wiltshire attempted to "generalise rashly" about what he labelled "the great tradition" in university adult education: he suggested it had five distinguishing characteristics. It was committed to "the humane or liberal studies" (which "concern us as men and women, not as technicians, functionaries or examinees"). It showed particular concern for studies "which illuminate man as a social rather than a solitary being"; its typical student was "not the scholar, the solitary, the scientist or the saint" but "the reflective citizen" (Wiltshire 1976, pp. 31–32). It required (Wiltshire's word was "demands") a "non-vocational attitude … and therefore examinations and awards, which imply and encourage other attitudes, are deplored". It combined "democratic notions about equality of educational opportunity with what may seem … unwarrantably optimistic assumptions about the educability of normal adults", and therefore rejected any selection of students by prior attainment ("if you are interested enough to attend the course and competent enough to meet its demands then you are a suitable student"). Finally, its characteristic educational approach was "the Socratic method" used in "small tutorial groups for guided discussion over a fairly long period" (ibid., pp. 31–32).

By the 1950s, however, alternative approaches were developing. Wiltshire's article, first published in 1956, was in part designed to defend this "great tradition" against emerging new trends. Broadly speaking, these saw vocational motives as legitimate, and accepted courses leading to examinations and awards; were often addressed to "an educated elite" who had relatively high levels of prior educational

attainment; and were often delivered through lectures, in shorter courses, and with less emphasis on discussion (Wiltshire 1976, pp. 33–34). Wiltshire had no objection to these new trends, but he thought it "unlikely" that they could co-exist with the more liberal and egalitarian "traditional" work – principally because they would compete for resources. Partly because the "great tradition" was endorsed in legislation,[4] and was thus (in modern *argot*) financially "ring-fenced" – and separately organised within extra-mural departments – it was the differences between these two types of provision, rather than their commonalities, which tended to be emphasised. In fact, however, the new variants which evolved within extra-mural provision from the 1950s onward were directed not only at the "educated elite", but also included innovative approaches to engaging working class communities, trade unions and their members, ethnic minorities and other socially excluded groups (see e.g. Duke 1996; Dyson 1996; Holford 1994). The same was true of the WEA in which innovative forms of community, trade union and women's education developed (Lovett 1967; Thompson 1980).

In the early 1970s, there was no indication that this form of adult education was either unnecessary or "unsustainable". A major government report, significantly entitled *Adult Education: A Plan for Development* (Russell 1973), concluded:

> In our changing and evolving society the explicit and latent demands for all kinds of adult education have increased and will continue to increase … Within our community there exists an enormous reservoir of human and material resources: a relatively modest investment in adult education – in staff, buildings, training and organisation – could release these resources to adult education for the benefit of individuals and the good of society (ibid., p. ix).

It added that a doubling of the number of students in all forms of adult education was "realistic". Adult education was "by any standards a mass activity" already; it was "growing", had "demonstrated its great adaptability to local conditions and proved its responsiveness to local demands" (ibid., p. xi). The new universities established following the 1963 report of the Committee on Higher Education (Robbins 1963) moved over the following decade or so to establish extra-mural departments (though typically named "continuing education"), often ousting older universities from areas they had served for half a century. As late as the mid-1980s Warwick was establishing such a department, much to Birmingham's discomfort (Marriott 1984, pp. 120–121). And as Bill Jones and Geoffrey Thomas (2009) point out, much of this work remained innovative, in community development, with trade unions and minority groups, and in "role education".[5]

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[4] Regulations had in 1918 allowed the Board of Education to make grants for "general as distinct from vocational education" of adults (SR&O 1919, No. 2231). In the 1950s, although the term used in the regulations was "liberal education for adults (SI 1959, No 394, quoted in Taylor and Saunders 1965, p. 437), the meaning was essentially unaltered. As Peter Jarvis noted, in Britain the term adult education had come to be associated with "specifically liberal education" (Jarvis 2004, p. 44).

[5] "Role Education" was defined by the University of Oxford Committee on Extra-mural Studies as "education providing a broad background of knowledge relevant to the performing of specific roles" (University of Oxford 1970, p. 30) and by Russell (1973, p. 35) as "liberal education for professional and other groups with a common function eg prison officers, clergy, managers, voluntary social workers".

There was, in short, nothing to indicate as late as the early 1980s that liberal adult education was "unsustainable". However, the 1980s in fact saw the beginning of the end of this form of provision, which was effectively defunct by the end of the century. Why? The tendency of recent discussion has been to emphasise "inevitabilities" – what Tawney referred to as "irresistible causes" – and to use "the fact that events have followed a certain course as in itself an indication that no other course was possible" (Tawney 1912, p. 177). For instance, Gareth Parry focused on the context: in the late 1980s and early 1990s "British higher education made the breakthrough to mass levels of participation"; in England this was followed by "a further phase of expansion intended to widen and deepen participation" and "change the pattern of future demand" (Parry 2009, p. 25). Under the "elite system" of the 1980s, he suggests, extra-mural work was "a source of distinctiveness"; in the "mass era", however, "a concern for the continuing or lifelong education of adults is a feature of the whole system and a core purpose of most, if not all, higher education institutions" (ibid., p. 36). (His assessment of the outcome seems Panglossian: if the education of adults is indeed now a "core purpose" of English universities, it seems honoured more in the breach than the observance.)[6] Chris Duke takes a slightly different perspective. Focusing less on the context than on what the extra-mural departments themselves did, he argues that English liberal adult education was "doomed by its high-minded origins" and organisationally "privileged status". It became, he suggests, "inward-looking and equally marginal to the challenges and possibilities for universities, as the higher education (HE) system evolved into the era of mass higher education" (Duke 2009, p. 169). While this appears to focus on the agency of the extra-mural sector, in reality what is emphasised is the failure to *adapt* to a changing environment – without problematising how or why that environment changed. It is, in short, a form of *institutional Darwinism* in which organisations unable to sustain themselves are held responsible for their own demise.

In fact, the changing environment was not an "act of God" (such as the asteroid said to have disposed of the dinosaurs), nor even the accidental effect of human behaviour (as when deforestation puts a species at risk), but the result in large part of deliberate policy decisions. There were funding cuts, radical changes in the funding methodology (increasingly based on measures of "output", sometimes bizarre). But most of all there was an ever-strengthened valorisation of the "vocational" and of accreditation. While as late as 1983 government funding for university adult education had been directed overwhelmingly to supporting non-vocational courses which did not lead to awards, from 1992 the call was to be vocational and award-bearing (Jones and Thomas 2009, pp. 82–83). Liberal university adult education was not "unsustainable": it was deliberately extinguished. And, as shown elsewhere (Holford and Welikala 2013), when in the late

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[6] Between 2002/03 and 2014/15, the number of *part-time* UK and EU undergraduate entrants to English higher educational institutions and further education colleges fell from 267,000 to 139,000; over the same period, the number of *full-time* UK and EU entrants rose from 321,000 to over 388,000. By 2014/15, only 23 per cent of all undergraduate entrants were part-time, compared to 45 per cent in 2002/03 (Callender 2015, pp. 17–18).

1990s an attempt was made to resurrect an element of "liberal" or non-vocational thinking into adult educational policy, it was decisively snuffed out.

Community development in the British colonies

At the end of 1943, the Colonial Office (the government department in London responsible for administration of Britain's overseas colonies)[7] published a white paper, *Mass Education in African Society* (Colonial Office 1943). Another, *Education for Citizenship in Africa* (Colonial Office 1948a), followed just over four years later. They were the key statements of a new turn in educational and development policy in the British Colonial Empire: the product, above all, of new thinking from the centre-left of British politics spearheaded by a group around the Fabian Colonial Bureau.[8] This group operated within Parliament, within the Colonial Office, and through a network of sympathetic administrators in the colonies, and when the Labour Party came to power in 1945, it shaped a fundamental redirection of policy towards the colonies. Britain's "central purpose" would now be "to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth in conditions that ensure to the people concerned both a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression from any quarter" (Colonial Office 1948b, p. 1). This was to be achieved by four key policy initiatives: co-operatives would improve farmers' access to markets, develop business attitudes and co-operative approaches, as well as skills and belief in democratic procedures; they would, along with publicly-owned marketing boards, help ensure profits from local production were retained locally, and used for the public benefit; new forms of local government would build understanding of democratic procedures and methods of administration; and trade unions would develop collective approaches and defend workers against the capitalist enterprises which were both a fact of colonial life and necessary for economic development (Lee 1967, pp. 111–127).

The glue which would hold these elements together was "mass education": although the term itself was displaced from around 1948 by "community development", the essential content remained unchanged (Holford 1988). "Mass education", should not, Arthur Creech Jones, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, argued in a despatch to colonial governors, be thought of as an extra burden on the education budget, "an expensive adjunct to the rest of the education programme". "On the contrary it is a means by which the people themselves may be persuaded to

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[7] The bulk of territories for which the Colonial Office was responsible lay in Africa. Britain's Indian Empire (modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar) fell under a separate department, the India Office.

[8] The Fabian Colonial Bureau was set up in 1940 as a "clearing house" – or in modern terminology, a "think tank" – on British colonial affairs and policy. It had a close relationship with the Fabian Society (formed in 1884), whose "reformist" or "gradualist" approach to socialism became a key theme in Labour Party thinking. In 1945 Arthur Creech Jones, one of its founders, found himself a minister in the Colonial Office; its role with him during the 1945–50 Labour government has been described as "one of the most remarkable instances of sustained and creative interchange between a minister and a pressure group which recent political history is able to provide" (Goldsworthy 1971, p. 144).

give their free efforts and assistance for the extension of education and other services." It was, he wrote,

> … the process of inducing the people to take an active part in movements for better living in all its forms. It is concerned not only with mass literacy and adult education, but also with better use of the land, better hygiene, better housing, social welfare, co-operation and any other activities aimed at better living. It demands the close co-operation of all branches of the central and local government and it cannot succeed unless the people understand the reasons for the measures being taken and are prepared to co-operate actively in them … It may ultimately be found to be the only effective means of securing the enthusiastic support of the people for development in all its forms in the rural areas of Africa. Mass education so conceived must therefore be an integral part of the development programmes in the African territories (Despatch to Colonial Governors on Mass Education, 25 April 1947, quoted in Whitehead 1997, p. 198).

Development, Creech Jones argued, could not be just an economic process: people – the "human element" – were central. Economic and political development were inseparable. In 1948, he told a conference of colonial administrators:

> Looked at by any real standard of values … it is less important that there should be a village school than that the people should have the initiative, not only to want a school and ask for a school, but actually to build and run it by their own efforts. It is less important that a productive industry should exist than that the people should acquire the practical knowledge of how to cultivate their own lands efficiently and without ruining the soil … [O]ur primary task in Africa in relation to the people is to stimulate their initiative, to do what can be done by Government officers to encourage people to want change and to equip them with the power themselves to create change (Jones 1948, pp. 3–4).

The key lay in African society itself: "The dynamic should come from within" (ibid., p. 12). But while development would be "initiated by the colonial peoples themselves", administrators – especially "mass education officers", later called community development officers – would "often [have] to supply the spark to kindle the flame" (ibid., p. 5). In 1949, a "Mass Education (Community Development) Committee" was established in the Colonial Office; it defined the work as:

> a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community, with the active participation and, if possible, on the initiative of the community but if this initiative is not forthcoming, by the use of techniques of arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement (CO 847/53/2, Africa, Community Development Organization 1950, "Community Development in Africa" quoted in Hodge 2007, p. 192).

This is not the place to rehearse the full history of the mass education exercise. As Clive Whitehead (1997) points out, professional expertise was developed through

the 1950s, advisers were trained, conferences were held, an extensive literature developed. According to historian Joseph Morgan Hodge, activities included

> anything that would make local villages better places in which to live: better crops and livestock, better water, health, housing, and roads, infant and maternity welfare, and education of both adults and the young. Community development officers were appointed to work together with representatives from the technical departments and the provincial commissioner to stimulate and develop ideas that could be implemented at the district level in consultation with local councils (Hodge 2007, pp. 192–193).

But mass education (or community development) faced opposition from many quarters, and at many levels. In particular, the same post-war period saw "growing confidence" in the role of science in agriculture. "Planned, rational state intervention", underpinned by networks of specialist scientific experts and advisers, imperial and regional research institutes and conferences, scientific fora, and periodic visits and tours, were thought to hold the answers. Promising "to reinvigorate and morally rearm the imperial mission in the late colonial epoch", Hodge sees it as "the most striking feature of British colonialism in the 20th century" (ibid., p. 8).

Profound tensions were also generated by Britain's post-war economic situation. This was driven in large part by Britain's post-war need to secure loans from the USA, the conditions imposed, and the resulting sterling crisis and devaluation. While Creech Jones was encouraging the development of democracy, governors were also being instructed "to intensify the exploitation of imperial resources … to earn dollars by exporting to the United States, and save dollars through substitution of imports from the dollar area to Britain" (Hodge 2007, p. 208). One community development officer later referred to the outcome as "big stick agriculture": agricultural staff were told to put "pressure on cultivators and even to assist local government in exacting obedience to local agricultural regulations" – not the most effective way of "identifying themselves with local aspirations and working closely with centres of local power" (Mason 1966). And there were of course those – even in high places – who thought the whole community development idea entirely unrealistic. Sir Philip Mitchell, for example, governor of Kenya 1944–1952, drafted a five-page rebuttal of *Education for Citizenship in Africa* – addressed to Creech Jones as Secretary of State, but copied to governors of other East and Central African colonies. The 1948 Colonial Office report was, he wrote, "wrapped" in a "mist of unreality" and failed to face up to "the unhappy but at present undeniable facts of African dishonesty, unreliability, untruthfulness and sloth" (Mitchell 1949, p. 2). There was "a totally inadequate amount of moral fibre in the character of Africans to support even a Parish Council" – the lowest form of local government in England. The whole enterprise was a diversion and should be ignored:

> Colonial governments, beset by many and pressing real problems, must be excused if they decline to direct their energies to the preparation of their subjects for a state of society … which there is certainly no prospect of establishing anywhere in Africa, and which is certainly beyond the

comprehension, and of course the capacity, of any community known to them to exist, and tend to concentrate their efforts upon objectives more readily attainable (ibid., p. 2).[9]

The story of colonial community development can, therefore, also be related in terms of its "unsustainability"; it did not overcome the challenges it faced. Of course, and unavoidably, it contained "deep ambiguities and tensions" (Holford 1988, p. 181) – perhaps these were sufficient to make "failure" inevitable. But it can also be seen as a progressive, developmental and democratising project brought down by political and economic opposition.

UNESCO and "Fundamental Education"

Half an hour after the constitution of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was signed in November 1945, Sir Alfred Zimmern, acting executive secretary of its Preparatory Commission, summarised the "feeling" of the first plenary meeting. Delegates, he said, wished the new organisation to direct its educational efforts to help countries where "large masses of human beings [are] living in conditions not only of poverty but of ignorance, and of removable ignorance". He proposed, to "general approval", that the organisation should move "quickly" to select "Illiteracy among adults and the means to be taken throughout the world to combat it" as its main educational focus (UNESCO 1947, pp. 9–10, quoting Zimmern). The following year a Commission on "Fundamental Education" was established; this issued its substantial report *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples* (UNESCO 1947) "as a working document" (Huxley 1947, p. 5) the following year. The programme's democratic and egalitarian purpose was explicit and powerfully-stated. The 1947 Report stressed it must be "a movement of the peoples themselves, democratic, inherently *de base*" (UNESCO 1947, p. 260). As Joseph Watras (2010, p. 224) put it, the report's authors hoped that Fundamental Education "would bring about a new social order and a lasting peace throughout the world".

Fundamental Education was to be UNESCO's "flagship concept and pro-gramme" until it was "unceremoniously dumped" (Jones and Coleman 2005, p. 59) at the tenth General Conference in 1958. As a term, Fundamental Education was used to describe "a field of activity which would include and go beyond mass education, adult literacy campaigns, popular education, and the provision of primary education", with the additional merit of suggesting "an education on to which more

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[9] By this time Mitchell was one of the Empire's most senior and influential governors. He had been governor of Uganda (1935–40) and Fiji (1942–44), while during 1940–42 he served first as *de facto* chief executive of the East African Governors' Conference, co-ordinating war production and military supplies in East Africa, and then (with the rank of major-general) as chief political adviser to General Sir Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. In the latter capacity he was responsible for establishing British administration in former Italian East Africa (i.e., Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland) (Throup 2004). By 1944, when Mitchell moved to Kenya as governor, Wavell was Viceroy of India. In fairness, Mitchell's attitudes to Africans seem to have been more nuanced than his letter to Creech Jones suggests: cf. Frost (1979, 1992).

could be built" (UNESCO 1947, p. 12). An article in the first issue of the *UNESCO Courier* explained:

> There had been a tendency, when the term "Fundamental Education" was first coined, to regard it as no more and no less than a campaign against illiteracy, but it soon became clear that the skills of reading and writing were only of value as a means to a wider end. This wider aim of Fundamental Education has now been defined – "to help men and women to live fuller and happier lives in adjustment with their changing environment, to develop the best elements of their own culture, and to achieve the economic and social progress which will enable them to take their place in the modern world" (Bowers 1948).

The main "on-the-ground" exercise in Fundamental Education was a pilot project in Haiti. This encountered a number of personnel, personal and administrative problems (Watras 2010, pp. 226–227) – as one might expect of a young international organisation's first major collaboration with a national government. When the Haitian project ended in the early 1950s, no funding was available for further pilots (Jones 1988, pp. 70–71), and UNESCO tried to develop a worldwide series of Fundamental Education centres, to provide information, resources and training. The first, a Regional Centre for Fundamental Education in Latin America (CREFAL), seemed to demonstrate their value. However, "the countries that UNESCO expected to donate the funds to support these centres did not contribute" (Watras 2010, p. 228).

How is this to be understood? Watras points to a number of tensions at the level of practice. Fundamental Education "focused on materialistic living standards", and although staff "tried to respect cultural differences", they faced the fact that "tolerance and materialism are not neutral entities … [and that] those values could contradict each other" (Watras 2010, p. 220). Overall, he concludes, Fundamental Education workers lacked a "philosophic direction"; as a result, they "expanded their efforts in many different directions with the effect that they undercut traditional cultures even though they wanted to reinforce indigenous values" (ibid., p. 237). In short, Fundamental Education's administrative and financial problems, and eventual demise, were the result of its own internal contradictions; it was, in other words, unsustainable.

As Watras points out, however, UNESCO "never acknowledged that fundamental education had failed in Haiti" (ibid., p. 226), and believed CREFAL showed that regional centres worked. They may or may not have been right. In a recent paper, Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee (2012) have explored the political economy of Fundamental Education. As early as 1947, they point out, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had begun secretly investigating UNESCO activities. (The background, of course, was the Cold War and domestic McCarthyism.) Encouraging co-operative enterprise and taking a "principled stand against usury" amounted, in critics' eyes, to evidence that UNESCO was under Communist influence:

The organization's second monograph on Fundamental Education, for instance, entitled *Co-operatives and Fundamental Education*, stressed what its author claimed were the mutually reinforcing values associated with education and economic cooperatives. "To work, purchase, sell and create together is to think together, and to think together is to form communicable ideas, that is to say rational ideas … The co-operative movement frees its members not only from usurers and profiteers, but also from themselves and their own bad habits." Thus, UNESCO moved beyond its specific mandate as an educational organization to grapple with larger political and economic questions as well as to advocate for progressive social change including birth control and interracial marriage (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 381).

From the early 1950s, claims were circulating in the U.S. that "UNESCO was under communist control, that it acted to undermine Americans' loyalty to their nation, that its staff members sought to indoctrinate schoolchildren, that the organization was atheistic, and that it received one-third of its budget from the United States but contributed little or nothing in return" (ibid., pp. 381–382). In 1953 an American political scientist, Luther Evans, took over as UNESCO's third Director-General. His two predecessors, Julian Huxley and Jaime Torres Bodet, had espoused a conception of the organisation's role which Vincenzo Pavone has called "Global UNESCO". This

drew inspiration from scientific humanism and presented utopian features. It aimed at the establishment of a peaceful universal community of humankind, with a system of global governance, a common morality and a shared philosophy, based on scientific knowledge and humanism (Pavone 2007, p. 81).

In contrast, Evans – who served for five years – advocated a "more limited, technical role" (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 383). This approach, which Pavone labels "Intergovernmental UNESCO", stressed "short-term objectives and approved a strict subordination of the organization to the UN and, less explicitly, to the US liberal ideology". It "tried to restrict UNESCO's educational policy to basic education and UNESCO's scientific policy to the function of a clearinghouse" (Pavone 2007, p. 82).[10] Nor was it a matter of the Director-General alone: it "found representation", according to Pavone (ibid., p. 82) "in the General Conference and, after 1954, in the Executive Board". And taking a slightly broader perspective, Dorn and Ghodsee (2012) point out that during the years UNESCO saw education as aimed at "social, political and economic development" – that is, from the end of the Second World War until 1962 – the World Bank did not lend "a single dollar" to education-related projects. It was only in the 1960s, when UNESCO's broader ambitions had been effectively circumscribed, that the World Bank began to

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[10] It was in this period that an internal "Working Paper on the Definition of Fundamental Education", seeking to clarify the term which had hitherto been used "rather loosely throughout the world", tentatively formulated "a variant of the 'official' definition of Fundamental Education". Its approach was to develop a definition through describing the agencies and methods which fundamental education might involve (UNESCO 1956). I am grateful to Maya Kiesselbach of *IRE* for drawing my attention to this paper.

contribute to education. And when it did so, its priorities were very different from those of Fundamental Education: they were "strictly vocational":

> Through the use of relatively clumsy manpower planning models, the World Bank tried to estimate how many engineers, technicians, or managers a particular country would need for its industrial sector to function properly, and then invested just enough in education to produce the required experts. Thus, between 1963 and 1969, 84 percent of the bank's educational lending went to secondary education, 12 percent went to higher education, and a mere 4 percent went to finance a few experimental projects in non-formal education (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 385).

This perspective casts a rather different light on the trajectory of Fundamental Education. Rather than a programme or movement which foundered on its own ideological contradictions – on Fundamental Education workers' "lack of philosophic direction" – we begin to see its critics gathering to attack virtually from the outset. Evans' arrival in 1953 broadly coincided with the end of the pilot projects; his departure in 1958 with the decision to drop "Fundamental Education". Rather than seeing it in terms of "unsustainability", we see a powerful political and ideological assault, supported by leading personnel within UNESCO and by the major – indeed, hegemonic – world power in the context of the Cold War.

Discussion

The three cases presented above are, of course, no random sample of 20th-century adult education. They are both carefully chosen and closely linked. The links are profoundly ideological, but they can also be illustrated through personalities. Historian and political scientist Alfred Zimmern, whom we have encountered advocating adult education as a central UNESCO activity in 1945, had many years earlier been a member of the "Joint Committee of University and Working-class Representatives" whose report, *Oxford and Working-class Education* (University of Oxford 1908), was influential in bringing universities and the WEA together in the tutorial class movement, and winning it governmental support. Arthur Creech Jones, the Colonial Secretary who pressed so strongly for mass education and community development, had attended evening classes as a young adult, wrote a WEA handbook on *Trade Unionism Today* (Jones 1928), and was vice-president of the WEA. Julian Huxley, UNESCO's first Director-General (1946–1948) who gave it a vision and underpinning philosophy (Sluga 2010), and oversaw the introduction of Fundamental Education, had been (with Creech Jones) a member of the British Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies (ACEC) which drafted *Mass Education in African Society* (Colonial Office 1943). Another of their ACEC colleagues, Margaret Read, was one of the five members of the Editorial Committee which drafted *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples* (UNESCO 1947).

So my choice of the three cases has a twin purpose: *first*, to show that adult education movements such as these had much of value to offer; *second*, to show that

their demise was not inevitable, but rather the result of political action. As to their value, I hope this is self-evident. They represent a view that adult education was profoundly linked to the development of democratic citizenship, to the need for knowledge and understanding to be part of that, and to a fundamental belief in the unity and equality of mankind. The WEA-tutorial class may have emphasised "liberal education" rather than bettering oneself financially, but colonial mass education and UNESCO's Fundamental Education were all about human betterment conceived in economic as well as social, political and personal terms. What they tried to do was marry the productive and economic with the personal and political to generate a more holistic view of education and society. How much difference would they have made if they had survived? English liberal adult education stood for creating an "educated and participating democracy" (Williams 1961): perhaps it would have helped forestall the "democratic deficit" which marks Britain today. If community development had been well-resourced and supported, perhaps democracy and local control could have resisted the social, political and economic forces which overwhelmed post-colonial Africa. If the World Bank had underwritten educational programmes in the spirit of Fundamental Education, perhaps the developing world would now be less at the mercy of international corporate capital. Perhaps not; perhaps it was all utopian: but since the programmes were undermined and terminated, we cannot know.

Let us return to "sustainability". Clearly, all three cases presage its "environmental" and "social" discourses (Giovannoni and Fabietti 2014): they were about improving the lives of people, in relation to their environments, on a global and local scale. But today, if anyone gives these examples even a passing thought, it is through the lens of neoliberal common sense: the institutional Darwinism of sustainability's "business" discourse. They did not survive; they therefore failed. As we have seen, applying the lens of contemporary common sense to history is not unusual. But, as Tawney put it, "it is only by dragging into prominence the forces which have triumphed, and thrusting into the background those which they have swallowed up, that an appearance of inevitableness is given to existing institutions …" (Tawney 1912, p. 177). Such is the ideological role of "business discourse" sustainability today.

Sustainability discourse has not been colonised by neoliberalism simply because the latter has become the common sense of our times. There are also important logical – as well as ideological – links between the theoretical apparatus of neoliberalism and the concept of sustainability. These lie in the highly influential popular application of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to social life (ironically, the life's work of T.H. Huxley, grandfather of UNESCO's Julian). As Harvey (2007, p. 157) argues, the neoliberal world-view is a "Darwinian" one: "only the fittest should and do survive". In economics this has been applied to entrepreneurial and business life-cycles, particularly through the idea of "creative destruction" (Schumpeter 1942) – now euphemistically rebranded creative "disruption". Innovative entrepreneurs (utilising new technologies, new sources of raw materials, or new forms of organisation) supplant and destroy large, well-established but "unsustainable" competitors. The "survival of the fittest" provides a plausible, if bogus, link between the logic of economic theory, natural selection and

the ecology of natural systems. Darwinian evolution involves not only innovation (the evolution of new species) but natural selection and extinction. As Harvey has argued, "Schumpeterians have all along gloried in capitalism's endless creativity while treating the destructiveness as mostly a matter of the normal costs of doing business" (Harvey 2010, p. 46). Extinction is not, however, cost-free; and the costs are borne not only by those who die, but by those who survive.

To conclude: my argument is that the notion of "sustainability" has been misappropriated by neoliberal common sense, in a form stripped of its deeper meanings. When applied to the evolution of adult education, this short-circuits critical analysis, and encourages easy assumptions that an approach or programme which did not survive was unsustainable and failed (or, to use a term favoured among Victorian Social Darwinists, was "unfit"). This is damaging, for at least two reasons. *First*, it discourages critical historical understanding. As Tawney pointed out, "social evolution" (a term he disliked) takes place "through the action of human beings" – actions often "violent, or merely short-sighted, or deliberately selfish". An outcome which now appears "inevitable" may once have "hung in the balance as one of several competing possibilities" (Tawney 1912, p. 178). *Second*, if an educational project, programme or movement has died, we should assume neither that its life had run its natural course, nor that it had nothing further of value to offer.

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