

# Rediscovering Adult Education in a World of Lifelong Learning

by  
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I consider it a great honour to have been asked to contribute to this remembrance of Pato—a great friend to many people and an especial member of the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CREA). I was unsure, however, about what I should write. I wondered whether I should read more of his writing and try to comment on what he had said, but I felt this inappropriate since he had already written it, and so I decided to look at the present situation in adult education and seek to understand why adult educators like Pato and other members of CREA are important in today's world. Sadly, in losing Pato we have lost an outstanding adult educator. I was also influenced by a comment that Marta once made to me about how Pato had hated the type of repressive regime of Franco from which Spain had emerged, but I do not think that we have actually emerged from totalism and even from some forms of repression.

We live in an 'Age of Learning' (Jarvis, 2001)—lifelong learning. In many ways lifelong learning was the ideal of many adult educators of previous generations (Hutchins, 1968; Husen, 1972) and it is still the ideal for others (Longworth, 1996)—but the questions must be asked at this time in history: have the ideals of those early adult educators been fulfilled, and is what we now have in lifelong learning the fulfilment of those aspirations? In this brief paper I want to argue that despite an apparent synthesis between the two concepts of lifelong learning and adult education, there are also important differences that must now be recognised, and these have become more apparent and more important because of the way that society is changing. I want to suggest that the advanced capitalist world is becoming more totalistic than ever before and that this form of totalism is being supported uncritically by lifelong learning despite some of its more questionable practices and procedures, and so we need to rediscover traditional adult education

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in order to provide a more critical perspective. The paper has three brief parts: the first examines the globalised capitalist society, the second looks very briefly at the idea of totalitarianism, and finally the place of lifelong learning and adult education is examined.

## Part I: Global Capitalism

Many theories of globalisation exist; Sklair (1991, pp.27-36), for instance, classified these into five:

- imperialist and neo-imperialist;
- modernization and neo-evolutionist;
- neo-Marxist (including dependency theories);
- world system (and the new international division of labour theory);
- modes of production theory.

All of them throw some light on globalisation, but none explain it fully and only by combining and modifying them can globalisation in contemporary society be explained. Starting with the neo-Marxist, the economic institution no longer alone constitutes the substructure of society, but there is still a substructure and it now includes technology, especially information technology, which has enabled the re-alignment of space and time. Indeed, when this combined with rapid transport systems, the world changed into a global village—a process of standardisation (Beck, 1992) or McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993). But this enabled the imperialist approach to have even more validity in the past decade since the USA has exerted itself as the single global imperial power (Americanisation) and became part of the substructure (See Jarvis, 2007 for a fuller discussion of this point).

Consequently, the concept of globalisation might best be understood as a socioeconomic and political phenomenon that has profound cultural and ethical implications. From an over-simplistic perspective, globalisation can be understood by thinking of the *world* as having a substructure and a superstructure, whereas the simple Marxist model of society was one in which each *society* had its own substructure and a superstructure. For Marx, the substructure was the economic institution and the superstructure everything else in social and cultural life—including the state, culture, and so on. Those who owned the capital, and therefore the means of production, could exercise power throughout the whole of their society. But over the years the significance of ownership declined as more mechanisms to control un-owned capital emerged. Now those who control the substructure exercise tremendous power throughout the globe, resulting in the centralisation of power and Westernisation (Americanisation) of the world. Supported by the political and military might of America, tremendous advances in information technology dominate the facilitation of these global processes. Consequently these globalising forces exercise standardising pressures on all socie-

ties. Once the power of the state looks diminished, as it has almost everywhere except the USA, it is hardly surprising that the state must respond to the demands of the substructure, especially those of the large transnational companies whose economies are greater than those of many countries in the world. At least two things result from this: there is a standardising effect on the world and people begin to lose respect for its politicians, as the European Commission (EC, 2001) recognised. The politicians now talk of power sharing, but few people who have power are prepared to share it unless they are forced to do so, and many of those who actually have it care little for what others claim in public! If this process affects states and cultures, then it becomes self-evident that it also affects the educational process.

The power of the sub-structural forces has become even more concentrated and politicians seem unable to control their activities, as Korten (1995) argues when he suggests that corporations will rule the world (see also Monbiot, 2000). This power is to be seen in almost every walk of life—advertising on TV, sponsoring cultural events, pressurised sales, conformity to the consumer culture—as Bauman (1999, p.156) suggest:

Once the state recognizes the priority and superiority of the laws of the market over the laws of the *polis*, the citizen is transmuted into the consumer, and a ‘consumer demands more and more protection while accepting less and less the need to participate’ in the running of the state. (*italics in original*)

The exertion of similar forces on each people and society is beyond doubt despite their different histories, cultures, languages, and so on, but these forces do not exist unopposed since different cultural groups seek to retain their own ways of life. In addition, some states and national governments still seek to oppose or modify the forces of globalisation. This gives rise to both convergence and difference.

The control of the substructure advertising and the control—overt and covert—exercised by employers over employees reinforce the process, and the influence it has on the educational system all point in the direction of Western society becoming totalistic. But it is Western society. For capitalism to be successful it needs to be lean and this demands an unemployed potential labour force in each country, even more so in the global society. There are the poor even in the rich countries and even more poor in the poor countries of the world—it is an unequal place, a place where the poor have no power and depend upon the moral responsibility of the wealthy.

## Part II: Towards a Totalistic Society

At least three approaches to totalism can be detected in the literature. Arendt (1976, p.ix) talks of totalitarianism as ‘the only form of government with which

coexistence is not possible'; in her studies of Soviet Communism and German Nazism, she is careful in her use of the term and she is well aware that in both of these societies the regime was never monolithic (p. xiv) and that there was a dual authority of the party and the state (p.93). The absolute authority in both cases lay with the leader and neither party nor state disputed with that authority. What is significant here is the separation of party and state—that totalitarianism is not monolithic.

In a similar tone, Lifton's (1961) focus is on ideological totalism in communist China; he (pp.477-497) examines eight criteria by which any environment can be judged as to the level of its brainwashing: milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for purity, the cult of confession, the 'sacred science, loading the language, doctrine over person, and the dispensing of existence. In a sense, some of these reflect the research that he carried out on people brainwashed in communist China, but we can also see that in contemporary Western global capitalism there is milieu control, the play on desire and the need to fulfil it, the sacred science of rationality and the scientific, the use of language to carry the values of capitalism, the idea that maximising the profit of the system is more important than the person and some people (the poor and those who live in countries that are of little or no use to global capitalism, except as a potential reserve army of labour) are non-persons, dispensable and forgettable—perhaps!

In contrast, Levinas (1961, p.38) recognises that when the stranger becomes a face, there is the beginning of ethics and he sees that totality is problematic in the relationship between the same and the Other. For him, society is necessary and in some ways it is important that everybody is part of the totality, but he (1961, p.61) goes on to say that 'the knowing subject is not part of the whole' because it is the individual who is morally responsible for the other—although no individual should expect reciprocity in the matter of moral responsibility. The totalisers seek always to place individuals into wholes (systems—if you like) and so that individual responsibility for the other is lost—to reach for infinity is to transcend the totality in relationship with the other—in a relationship of concern for the other. While we can agree that the whole is more than the sum of its parts (totality) in some ways, we can also say that the parts are more than the totality in other ways because each individual is a morally responsible agent for the other. What we find, however, in the literature of the learning society (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Ranson, 1994; Longworth, 1996; Wenger, 1998), and much of the current management literature (Senge, 1990) is an emphasis on systems rather than individual responsibility. We need to rediscover the latter—a not very visible value in the language of lifelong learning.

### Part III: Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

Since the 1990s, the term 'adult education' has seemed to disappear and lifelong learning assumed prominence. Lifelong learning emphasises that we are able to

learn throughout the whole of our lifespans and that we need to keep on learning in order to keep abreast with the developments in contemporary society. In the first instance, the ‘discovery’ that we learn throughout our lives is to be applauded and with it the new emphasis on providing opportunities for adults to learn. However, much of what they learn—either through television and other forms of advertising—focuses upon the need for individuals to be consumers. Indeed, capitalism cannot survive unless it continues to create consumers, at whatever cost to the consumers, and sell its products and generate profit and capital. In addition, most of the emphasis on lifelong learning is on vocational learning—learn in order to get a job, learn in order to be a member of the corporation (the whole), learn in order to keep abreast with the latest developments so that individuals can play their part in the production process. Capitalism needs workers and consumers who can accept in an unquestioning manner its ideology and so it colonized the education and learning processes—both institutional and non-institutional. Naturally, in an industrial world, it is necessary to learn in order to function as a member of society but it has become morally reprehensible ever to speak out against the whole, even though the culture of the totality is imposed on the whole by those who have the power to do so. In this sense, we are all members of the totality and are all part of its totalising influence—sociologists have long recognised that we are both socialised and over-socialised (Wrong, 1963) into society. In this one sense, lifelong learning is in all of its manifestations a totalising force and an agent of totalisation but a very necessary one in today’s society—but not the only one!

Adult education is something else! Adult education is about treating individuals as adults and educating them so that they may mature and develop as responsible persons playing their full part in the world. It is about being prepared in adult life to act in the cause of right because we are free individuals (Freire, 1972), even to be prepared to learn to resist (Newman, 2006) the powers that be. Adult education is about responsibility for the other without seeking to exercise power over the other. It emphasises the individual within the totality and what Levinas sees as the possibility to transcend the totality. Indeed, Peperzak (1993,p.36) nicely sums up Levinas’ position by suggesting that he saw God ‘as “he” who left a trace in *anarchical responsibility*’ in individuals. Critical adult education looks at the totality from the viewpoint of individuality and the potentiality of infinity.

## Conclusions

Contemporary global capitalism is a totalising force creating totalities, and its power co-exists with that of the politicians. Indeed, it supersedes it. Such an approach to society demands the types of lifelong learning that we have and this approach to learning is both necessary and can be very beneficial at times. But the global capitalist world has not created a utopia—we have the third world and the third world in the first world. While we may need capitalism as an efficient production and distribution process, we also need individuals who are morally

responsible. We need lifelong learning in order to produce an efficient system that can be of service to the whole world, but we also need to rediscover adult education which can help us realise our individual freedom and exercise our own moral responsibility to the other in an imperfect world.

It is this approach to the education of adults that I believe was embodied by Pato and which is to be found in the work of many critical adult educators—it is also, I think, a reflection of the philosophy of CREA.

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