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The God that Failed¹

Lifelong Learning: From Utopianism to Instrumentalism

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Introduction

As the saying goes, “a beloved child has many names”. So, too, is the case with the concept to be dealt with in this paper. Over the years various concepts have been used to denote education in a lifetime perspective, such as “education permanente”, recurrent education and lifelong learning. There are many who have disputed the correctness or appropriateness of one or the other concepts. Boudard (2001), for example, argues “some researchers maintain that today the concept of recurrent education, originally advanced by OECD, is the most widely recognized as the strategy that leads to lifelong learning, although the concept of lifelong learning often comes to mind”, citing Tuijnman, 1989; and OECD, 1973.

Given the lack of clarity in the above argument, it is not surprising that confusion abounds as to what lifelong learning is, what the “strategy” entails and who it benefits. The aim of this article is to present a critical perspective on lifelong learning, such as it has developed over the years through my own work and the work of others.

First, however, it is important to consider the birth of this “beloved child”, to understand from whence it came and under what circumstances. Despite the fact that much has been written about this topic, there are few who mention the fact that as Minister of Education (1967-1969) Olof Palme introduced in Sweden the concept of “återkommande utbildning”, which literally translated means recurrent education. Palme himself motivated this reform strategy as a means by which “to rectify after the fact, to break down the class barriers to education”². In other contexts, the same concept has been viewed as a political strategy to divert attention

¹ The title of this paper is the same as that of an anthology, published in 1949 in which six contributors--- Louis Fischer, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender and Richard Wright---expressed their disillusionment with the great ideology of their time, Communism.

² <http://www.palmecenter.se/OlofPalme/Artiklar/OPBiografi.aspx>, accessed on March 3, 2009, 10:36 a.m.

from the failure of the Social Democratic party to expand access to higher education at the rate promised (O'Dowd, 2000).

Re-defining education as learning

Despite the varying ways of describing and defining lifelong learning, the concept appears to have maintained the dualistic nature it had from the start, i.e., on the one hand, a utopian vision of education as the “social equalizer” and, on the other hand, a political strategy. Increasingly, however, the political strategy, as defined in United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Trade Organisation, the European Union and national government policy and practice, has become synonymous with an economic perspective on human development, through the widespread use of human capital theory. This strategy has overshadowed the utopian vision of education, giving rise to a dominant discourse the characteristics of which according to Coffield (1999) are the following:

- It focuses attention on education investments, rather than on structural failures and injustices and blames the victims for their poverty, while it places responsibility for educational failure on learners, rather than on education systems, education policy and practices;
- It has serious theoretical and empirical flaws ;
- It lacks a sense of history and an awareness of “the maintenance of particular gendered power relations in the workplace” ;
- It has a “fundamental weakness”, as it regards “human capital as a “thing” to be acquired and utilized alongside other factor inputs”, ignoring “the social context of skills and of technology”;
- It creates credential inflation ;
- It deflects interest and awareness from a discourse on social justice and social cohesion.

The Construction of meta phenomena

Central to the lifelong learning discourse as outlined above is the production of a scenario of fear and exclusion, or perhaps more correctly a scenario of the fear of exclusion. Through the construction of meta phenomena, such as “the knowledge society”, “the knowledge economy” and “the learning economy”, the discourse in Europe has gained support from individuals, governments and other organizations, playing on their fear of being “left out”.

According to Keeling, what we are experiencing in Europe is the construction of a hegemonic discourse on higher education with the following characteristics: higher

education is *purposeful*, it *leads somewhere*, it is *an inherently productive activity*, the outcomes of which are *measurable*, while higher education itself is *economically beneficial* (Keeling, 2006: 209). Indeed, this discourse has affected the way in which all education is viewed. Wain maintains that “the discourse of performativity has infiltrated the world of education at all levels, that it has become the dominant discourse in Europe and that, notwithstanding protestations to the contrary, it largely informs the EU’s lifelong learning agenda which has, over recent years, very significantly, abandoned the socially oriented notion of the learning society and replaced it with the technocratic notion of a knowledge-based society” (Wain, (2006: 108). In short, education has been re-defined, or as Harris puts it: It has become “impoverished” by its re-definition in terms of learning. “Learning is valued for its contribution to the preservation and growth of the learning capacity...while little meaning is attached to the meaning of individual’s life...The value of education as important in itself is not recognised. There is no recognition of the purpose of education as a means of questioning the self and society. There is no space to think about difference and what it means in a globalised economy” (Harris, 2007: 354). Harris goes on to describe the effects of what Wain terms performativity: “knowledge has been reduced to information. Instrumental reasoning, new regimes of accountability, and strict adherence to the economic imperative”, not only characterise higher education, but increasingly influence an understanding of what education is and what are its goals. This re-definition is furthered by a “measurable input-output model of education” with “unambiguous aims and objectives, learning outcomes and a transparent assessment system”, which are all features of a pervasive education model, a model which perpetuates a view of education as instrumentalism (Harris, 2007:349).

Education and democracy

In different ways educators are increasingly expressing concern as regards the fate of all education, not least as regards the topic at hand, lifelong learning. Standish (2005) protests against a view of education as restricted to that which can “be given expression, measured, standardised and quantified”. Rather he maintains that what is taught “should not be conceived in terms of banks of knowledge, or transferable skills or competences of whatever kind” (ibid: 61). Citing Oakeshott, Standish argues that learning a subject is “the initiation into a conversation, a conversation of which we are the inheritors” (ibid):

Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human utterance (Oakeshott, 1989).

If, indeed, education is a conversation, Biesta’s argument regarding the individualisation of lifelong learning raises interesting issues. Or to make the same point more provocatively, one is reminded of the everyday phrase used ironically in the Swedish context which highlights the fact that speaking to oneself provides one with the most interesting answers, as opposed to

speaking with others, whose answers are less interesting, less challenging, and less predictable. Biesta points out that engaging in lifelong learning today requires learners to engage in a conversation in which they have little or no control:

The predicament here is that while individuals are being made responsible for their own lifelong learning, the “agenda” for their learning is mainly set by others. This then raises the question why one should be motivated to learn throughout one’s life; why one should be motivated to learn “forever” (Halliday, 2004) if decisions about the content, purpose and direction of one’s learning are beyond one’s own control. What is the point of lifelong learning, we might ask, if the purpose of lifelong learning cannot be defined by the individual learner; if, in other words, lifelong learning has no point for the individual who has to “do” the learning? (Biesta, 2006: 176).

A longitudinal study of Swedish learners show that those engaged in “learning for earning” do so up until the age of 35, while those who can conceivably be defined as “lifelong learners”, where education is defined in utopian terms as enrichment, meaningfulness, insight and knowledge, engage in learning activities throughout their “productive” lives and after retirement, opting for educational activities where they can choose the content, purpose and direction of their education themselves (O’Dowd, 2005). Interesting in this context is the way in which adults are conceptualised: whether or not they are entrusted with the right to determine what needs they wish to fulfil and how they wish to fulfil them. As Biesta points out, “the key question to ask in the light of the recent rise of the learning economy is precisely the question about the relationship between lifelong learning and democracy” (ibid 178).

A Return to Utopianism

Buras & Apple (2008) have traced the development of neoconservatism, today representing “a powerful political, cultural, and economic force” (p. 291). “The story of neoconservatism often begins with the 1960s. The new left inspires a new right, including a neoconservative faction focused on the restoration of a “common” cultural tradition and a disciplined, socially cohesive nation” (ibid:292). Today neoconservatives constitute “a part of a broader rightist coalition, which is closely linked to narratives of crisis, discourses of fear and instability, and nostalgic desires to restore cultural integrity and the foundations of “American” (and Western) civilization” (ibid). The consequences of neoconservatism for education, read all education, are many, according to the authors, who maintain that neoconservatives “increasingly embraced anti-utopianism” while “neoconservative understandings serve to discourage and discipline the imagination of more democratic conceptions of education”. Against the “deadening standardisation, “security” and “stability” endorsed by neoconservatives”, Buras & Apple call for “renewed confidence in the possibilities of imagination” and a return to utopianism, citing Kelley :

The idea that we can possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imaginations...is the classic definition of utopia. The map to a new world

is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eye rather than in the desolation that surrounds us (Kelley, 2002:2).

Anti-utopianism impoverishes education. It robs education of its goal of personal, social and cultural transformation, which gives it its legitimacy. Understanding oneself and one's position in the world and in relation to others is one of the main tasks of education, as is instilling an understanding of "the infinite process of struggle", which can not only transform education, but "educate all of us about the "great things that can happen when you fight for what is right" and look at the world through a third set of eyes" (Buras & Apple, 2008: 31). Knowledge and understanding can not be seen as two separate processes. They do not bear any resemblance to information, nor do they lend themselves well to "instrumental reasoning, new regimes of accountability, and strict adherence to the economic imperative". Most importantly "academic subjects and high status knowledge ...is essential for traditionally marginalized students in a world where epistemology and stratification are closely linked" (ibid: 297):

At the very same time, such knowledge needs to be organised critically and connected to the pressing problems faced by those who have the least amount of economic and cultural power (Apple 1996, 201; Buras 2008).

The emancipatory power of education is not an unimportant issue, although there are those who wish us to view education as a "cognitive-technical process through which factual content is transmitted" (Buras & Apple, 2008: 297). The similarity between this view and the recently published EU definition of knowledge ought not to be considered coincidental³. Against this view of education and knowledge is placed the vital role education plays to instil hope, where there is none, to provide understanding in the face of ignorance, to provide the tools for living with others and envisioning a better world for us all. This is a utopian view of education.

Utopianism is a necessity of the moral imagination. It doesn't necessarily entail a particular politics; it doesn't ensure wisdom about current affairs. What it does provide is a guiding perspective, a belief or hope for the future, an understanding that nothing is more mistaken than the common notion that what exists today will continue to exist tomorrow. This kind of utopianism is really another way of appreciating the variety and surprise that history makes possible...it is a claim for the value of desire, the practicality of yearning---as against the deadlines of acquiescing in the 'given' simply because it is here (Howe, 2004).

³ "Knowledge" means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study. (EQF 2008: 11).

The God that Failed

In the 1960s, Olof Palme first introduced the concept of recurrent education as a means by which “to rectify after the fact, to break down the class barriers to education”. This utopian vision of what has come to be known as lifelong learning has long since been overshadowed by instrumentalism. Recurrent education was also introduced simultaneously as a political strategy --to divert attention from the failure of the Social Democratic government to expand access to higher education at the pace promised. Recurrent education, framed as a reform for social justice, was historically, politically and socially legitimate. The question remains, however, if this “beloved child”, the product of a troubled marriage, is indeed a “beloved child” at all. Perhaps recurrent education was a deus ex machine which today can be seen as a God that Failed. Given the emergence of neoconservatism, which Buras & Apple (2008) maintain began in the 1960s, the failure of the invoked God is perhaps understandable. Or perhaps His failure has more to do with the fact that He was called upon to perform, not one, but two drastically different acts of divine intervention at one and the same time. A difficult task, it may be argued, even for a deity.

(2387 words not including footnotes and references)

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