CHAPTER 10

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF ILLITERACY

Perspectives as Ideology

In the preceding two chapters, arguments and evidence presented which, while admittedly incomplete, nevertheless raise serious doubts about the adequacy of the liberal perspective as an explanation of the causation of poverty and the role of illiteracy in it. At the same time, they suggest that the critical perspective, although only an emerging viewpoint at present, points the way to a superior theoretical explanation of poverty and guide for adult literacy and basic education. If we provisionally accept these conclusions, how then can we account for what has been the remarkable success of the liberal perspective in dominating adult education thought and practice from the late 1950's through to the present

It is argued here that to answer this question, we must look beyond the function of the liberal perspective as a scientific description of social reality, a category in which it has been found wanting, to its exceptional practical value as a means of cementing prevailing power relationships.

For example, Marxist political economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argue that the "human capital" economic theory on which the liberal perspective rests:

> provides an elegant apology for almost any pattern of oppression or inequality.... for it ultimately attributes social or personal ills either to the shortcomings of individuals or the unavoidable technical requisites of production. It provides, in short, a good ideology for the defense of the status quo. But it is a poor science for understanding either the workings of the capitalist economy or the way towards an economic order more conducive to human happiness.[1]

Similarly, Howard Wachtel accuses social scientists of confusing the characteristics of poverty with its -causes, thus fostering the impression that the poor are responsible for their own poverty and leading to the conclusion that for poverty to be eliminated, it is the poor, and not the economic system, that must change. [2] He asserts that -the theory and - research which provided the basis for U.S. manpower training programs:

> has performed an important stabilizing and obfuscating function; it has received wide acceptance precisely because it has been conveniently supportive of existing social arrangements and our prevailing social ideology.[3]

Like the human capital theory on which it rests, the liberal perspective -on illiteracy is highly favourable to the interests of dominant classes in that it provides the framework of assumptions for an adult literacy and basic education practice which reinforces the status quo. Conversely, the critical perspective fundamentally challenges the basis of existing power relationships among classes, and so has positive implications for the long-term interests of impoverished surplus population stratum of the working class. It is suggested here that it is this ideological aspect of perspectives on illiteracy--their practical value in the conflict between classes--which more than any other single factor explains the pattern of dominance and subordinance among them (i.e. their different degrees of influence on educational thought and Practice).

Further, lower case it is argued in the present chapter that this proposition holds true not only for the present period, but also for the whole historical span of educational responses to illiteracy in Canada, which extends back to the middle of the 19th century and encompasses a succession of relatively distinct theoretical perspectives on the problem. In the present chapter and the two following it, we consider all of these historical periods. In doing so, we able to more clearly isolate the essential relationship of perspectives on illiteracy, and the educational programs they inform, to phenomena of class and class conflict than if we were to limit ourselves solely to the most recent period (i.e. from the late 1950's to the present) This historical survey suggests that new episodes of concern about illiteracy have accompanied fundamental shifts in the capitalist accumulation process, and have constituted responses to the social crises which they entail. There is evidence that the present time of economic and social crisis is the harbinger of a similar shift. Therefore, a critical history of literacy of this nature can be useful for adult basic educators in helping them to better understand the nature of the challenges which now confront them, both within their profession and in the larger society.

The present historical analysis is particularly indebted to the work of Coolie Vernor, the late Professor of Adult Education at the University of British Columbia, who laid part of the foundation for the critical study of the history of adult literacy in Canada in a brief but suggestive 1974 article. [4] However, Vernor worked within the assumptions of liberal sociology, and his views are phrased in its terms and suffer from its limitations. Therefore, the attempt is made in the present analysis to 'extract' his critical insights, reformulate them on the terrain of Marxism, and expand their scope.

Historical Overview

With the establishment of public schooling for children in Upper Canada in the mid-19th

century, the right of children to basic education was recognized in law. In spite of this, for a variety of reasons many adult Canadians since then either did not receive basic education as children, or even if they did, did not become literate. If we ignore for the moment the problems of commensurability of historical definitions and measures of illiteracy, we find that as long as records on the matter have been kept, illiteracy has been a fact of life for substantial minorities of Canadian adults. The census of the 1860's showed that about 10% of the adult population of Upper Canada reported that they could not read or write.[5] In the 1891 census of Canada, 15% of the population 10 years of age and over answered in the negative to the question, “Can you read and write?”[6] In 1921, 20.2% answered in this way. [7] From the 1941 census onward, this question was dropped and data on highest grade of school completed was substituted. The percentage of Canadians 15 years of age and over with 8 or fewer years of schooling was 59.1% in 1941, 8 53.4% in 1951, 9 46.8% in 1961 10 and 28.4% in 1976. [11]

The factors explaining the persistence of low educational attainment and illiteracy in Canada can be divided into several categories. First, there are historical factors, such as the slow development of schools and compulsory attendance laws and enforcement of these laws in some. areas of Canada, particularly hinterland regions. Another is the fact that many of the adult immigrants to Canada have been illiterate in the English language and often in their native tongues as well. A second category of factors has to do with attitudes and values. Here we may refer to the low estimation on the part of economic and political elites of the need and importance of education for the working class and independent commodity producers, such as farmers. A third category is institutional factors, including the phenomena of poor schools, inadequately trained teachers, and inadequate and class biased curricula and methods. Finally, we may refer to a fourth category, family and personal factors. These include the need of some families to keep children home in productive labour, the non-attendance of some children due to illness, and the personal learning problems of others.

As was argued in the previous chapter, illiteracy is closely related to uneven development at the regional and class levels. what unites the above factors, despite their diversity, is the fact that they have systematically and disproportionately affected members of subordinate social classes, including unemployed, seasonally employed or otherwise underemployed members of the blue collar working class, and impoverished independent commodity producers among petty bourgeoisie, especially fishermen and farmers. Illiteracy rates have historically been highest among these classes and the bulk of illiteracy has been and continues to be located among their ranks. This is not to suggest that illiteracy does not occur among dominant classes, e.g. among small businessmen and professionals (i.e. independent petty bourgeoisie) or the capitalist class, only that it has been a relatively rare phenomenon and is better understood as an element of an individual life history that as part of a similar broad sociological pattern. [12]

Because of their preponderantly subordinate class status, illiterate adults have

since the 1850's normally lacked both a collective voice through which to articulate their problems and needs --including educational ones like illiteracy--and access to a political movement capable of forcing the larger society to act on them. This goes a long way toward explaining why a "second chance" to learn basic literacy skills has not been recognized as a right in Canada, and has not been institutionalized in the manner of childhood education. Instead, the provision of literacy instruction has been intermittent and never adequate.

Furthermore, it has rarely been the day to day hardships and limitations experienced by illiterate adults which have been the main factor in provoking public attention to the problem of illiteracy. Instead, the principal catalyst has been the concern on the part of dominant classes about threats to the existing power structure posed by the impoverished groups to which illiterate adults belong. [13]

Elite Concerns

These threats, such as crime and political protest, have arisen out of the social disruption accompanying major shifts in the capitalist accumulation process in Canada, including its consolidation, deepening or widening. We can identify three principal periods of transition. The first was the rise in the mid-1800's of the capitalist factory system in an economy dominated by agriculture and craft production. The second was the demise of small-scale competitive capitalism and the rise of large-scale monopoly capitalist enterprise in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The third occurred in the 1950's and early 1960's, when Canada completed its transition from an economy still heavily engaged in labour-intensive industry to a modern, capital-intensive corporate economy. We are already acquainted with the last transition as it figured prominently in the discussion in the previous two chapters.

Each of these transitional periods has been characterized by distorted and uneven economic and social development, and has called forth -a large, vulnerable and ill-educated surplus population suffering low wages, high rates of unemployment and general insecurity. In the mid-1800's, the surplus population was largely composed of Irish immigrants who were originally drawn to Upper Canada to work in lumbering and the building of canals, roads and railways, and who later became the new industrial proletariat. The transition to monopoly capitalism of the late 1800's and early 1900's saw the recruitment of a surplus population of native and immigrant labourers, who made possible the expansion of sectors like farming, lumbering, mining, and railway construction. Finally, as we have already seen, the transition to a modern corporate economy in the 1950's produced a large surplus population of displaced hinterland residents and recent immigrants.

Insecure, impoverished and suffering from severe social problems, the surplus population of each period has in various ways posed a serious challenge to established social and political leadership in Canada. Economic and political elites have reacted to these threats to their positions not by ameliorating the harsh economic conditions

responsible for the social disruption, which their own vested interests in the existing system have prevented them from questioning, but by pursuing strategies for the social control and ideological incorporation of the victims of these conditions--the poor. For this reason, they have at various times been receptive to the theories advanced by educators and others which attribute the cause of various threatening conditions associated with poverty, and even poverty itself, to the phenomenon of illiteracy, and have supported literacy programs which promise to channel or defuse their effects.

Thus with elite sponsorship, a new, relatively coherent theoretical perspective on illiteracy has emerged during each transitional period, reflecting their needs and concerns. It has come to dominate educational thought and programing well beyond the immediate transitional period, and has become prominent in the media, books, government reports, etc. Moreover, it has come to function as the “common sense” outlook on illiteracy, even among laymen. We will explore the history of responses to illiteracy in Canada, and perspectives which informed them, beginning with the period of mid-1800's. When we have examined the three periods of response, we will advance -some generalizations about the role of adult basic educators in relation to class and class conflict.

Literacy and the Rise of the Factory System

Upper Canada in the 1840's was a society still heavily engaged in agrarian, artisanal and mercantile economic pursuits, but was poised on the threshold of the era of capitalist manufacturing. [14] The main factor delaying the takeoff of the factory system was the absence of a reserve of landless laborers to man this new form of enterprise. [15] The reserve was created through two principal means. On one hand, tens of thousands of immigrants, the majority of them from Southern Ireland, were attracted to Upper Canada to meet the demand unskilled labour generated by lumbering and railway, road, and canal construction. [16] On the other hand representatives of the incipient industrial capitalist class secured legislation severely restricting land grants, forcing the new immigrants to remain in the ranks of wage labour rather than enter farming as earlier immigrants had done.[17] In this way, Irish Catholic immigrants became the first surplus population in Canada, a pool of disposable labour power for the emerging capitalist labour market.[18]

By the 1860's, Canada was experiencing its industrial revolution. Large factories dotted the landscape of many early industrial cities, largely manned by the propertyless laboring class of Irish immigrants. [19] The -transition to industrial capitalism generated growth and prosperity--growth of cities, transportation networks, markets and manufacturing capacity, and prosperity for investors, owners and builders--but at the cost of poverty, crime and social conflict, particularly among the Irish surplus population. [20] Elites feared the growing danger to social order posed by these conditions

For example, the low -wages, ill-treatment and unemployment suffered by Irish

workers in the course of the canal, road and railway construction of the 1840's generated militant and sometimes violent strikes and protests. H. Clare Pentland writes that:

> when the Irish felt themselves victimized by employers or governmental authorities--and they were victimized frequently--they combined for resistance readily... and often struck back violently. Employers and officials were infuriated by this behavior. They wanted Irish laborers to accept "the law of supply and demand" in economic matters...and the regular processes of law in allocating rights.[21]

Moral Bases of Literacy

Educational reformers like Egerton Ryerson, the first Chief Superintendent of Education in Upper Canada, represented the avant-garde of the emerging capitalist class in urging the replacement of the prevailing informal and voluntary provisions for education by a centralized, compulsory, tax-supported school system which would respond to these social problems and smooth the way for the emerging industrial order.[22] A principal theme of this ultimately successful campaign was the singling out of the "ignorance" and illiteracy of immigrant Irish laborers as the main cause of the crime, "pauperism" (not poverty--rather, dependence of public charity) and class conflict afflicting Upper Canada, and the efficacy of education, particularly literacy education, in eliminating them.[23]

The perspective on literacy which informed the efforts of educational reformers like Ryerson has been termed the "moral bases of literacy".[24] Literacy was not seen as significant in and of itself. Rather literacy instruction was seen as the vehicle for the inculcation of an approved moral code, one based on Christian values and emphasizing restrained and controlled behavior.[25] Literacy was seen as essential for a “respectable” mode of life. Prentice explains that “respectability” consisted of “refined manners and taste, respectable religion, proper speech and finally, the ability to read and write proper English”.[26]

Conversely, the condition of illiteracy was an outward sign that the inculcation of this moral code had not taken place--the visible manifestation of an underlying ignorance and "want of respectability" that was the root of personal and social deviance.[27] According to Graff, Ryerson and other educational reformers saw a simple chain of causation:

> Ignorance and illiteracy, as Ryerson argued, were the first causes of poverty and crime, the latter two in turn being inextricably linked. Each was seen to cause the other, particularly among immigrants and in cities. The result was a simple causal explanation or model of criminality: ignorance caused idleness, intemperance, and improvidence, which resulted in crime and poverty.[28]

Ryerson and his colleagues appealed to empirical evidence with regard to the problem of crime. They examined the educational records of prisoners, and found that more than 95% of the incarcerated:

> had grown up without the advantages of a good common school education; and that less than 5 percent of the crimes committed, were committed by persons who could even read and write well.[29]

In their view, this clinched the causal argument. However, as Graff points out:

> Their notions of causality may be questioned, for they were unable to recognize poverty as a structural feature of capitalist society. To them pauperism and idleness stemmed from ignorance; economic failure and social deviance derived from moral weakness, and many were considered paupers by choice, not by chance or structural inequality.[30]

Elite Interests

In their campaign for common schools, Ryerson and his colleagues made use of this perspective as one means of appealing to self-interests of elites faced with the consequences of rapid disruptive social change. To the petit bourgeoisie, (i.e. made up of subordinate elements of the entrepreneurial class like merchants small manufacturers, the certain segments of the propertied artisan class) who feared the loss of their privileged status with destruction of traditional craft production and the accelerated development of the industrial base, Ryerson stressed the necessity of literacy,-as gained through schooling, in preventing downward mobility.[31] -He wrote:

> I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits upon society.[32]

Ryerson asserted that the man who left his -son uneducated risked living to see him become one of the underdogs, the "dregs", of Upper Canadian society. [33]

To the emerging manufacturing class who depended on the Irish as the pool of labour from which they would draw the unskilled “mechanics” for their enterprises, Ryerson emphasized the efficacy of schooling for moulding a 'safe' and disciplined working class. He asserted that "educated labour is more productive than uneducated labour.[34] Prentice observes that: "By 'productive' he meant a variety of related qualities: less disruptive, more skilled, orderly and disciplined, punctual, and moral.”[35] The transmission of cognitive skills was secondary; more important was the moral instruction that would accompany the transmission of literacy--it would help regularize

and discipline the behavior of workers among whom pre-industrial habits and rhythms persisted.[36] It would be a more effective means than overt coercion in the workplace. Ryerson states:

> And if the intended mechanic should be trained to a mastery of his native tongue, he should, on still stronger grounds, be instructed in the nature of his social relations and duties. If he should be taught to speak correctly, he should be taught to act uprightly. He should be correct in his actions as well as his words.[37]

For Ryerson and the other school promoters, literacy and disciplined behavior went hand in hand in the education of the laboring class.

Conclusion

In summary, the theme of education--including literacy instruction --as a means of preventing or controlling the social disruption accompanying the rise of capitalist manufacturing was a prominent one in the common school movement of the mid-1800's in Upper Canada. However, while there is evidence that the new schools eased the transition in that they muted class conflict somewhat, [38] they could not ameliorate the poverty and exploitation which fueled the conflict. In Schecter's view,"the reformers practiced self-deception, first thinking that capitalist progress was possible without the attendant dislocation and exploitation; second, in claiming that education would make this prospect possible. [39]

According to Schecter:

> For Ryerson and his colleagues the establishment of such a system was the means by which the state would save the bourgeoisie from itself.[40]

However, even if the new common school was primarily oriented to interests of elites, it also met some of the hopes and needs of subordinate classes, for whom access to public education had long been a democratic demand. [41] Marxist historian Stanley Ryerson emphasizes this aspect of the victory of the common school movement:

> What was being undertaken was a response to both the industrial and the democratic revolutions: modern manufacturing required, and the working people sought, universal elementary education. “The knowledge required for the scientific pursuit of mechanics, agriculture and commerce must be provided to an extent corresponding with the demand and the exigencies of the country.” This Judgement of Ryerson's expressed recognition of the imperatives of national democratic development as well as of bourgeois industrialism.[42]

In contrast with Ryerson's quite optimistic assessment, we may that the victory of the

common school movement was a profoundly ambiguous development for the working class; it afforded access to free public education and literacy instruction--and so represented a gain--but at the same time brought about the more complete subordination of this class within the emerging industrial capitalist order.

Literacy Education and the Working Class

There was general support among the working class for extension of common schooling. For example, in 1872 the Ontario Workman argued that "a thorough and general system of education we consider to be one of the first duties of the state; to see what in all its branches it is placed as near as possible within the reach of every son and daughter of the land".[43] However, during the mid-1800's, several spokesmen for the working class, including writers in the labour press, articulated an alternative perspective on literacy and education which departed in important ways from the one propounded by Ryerson and the other middle class educational reformers. It never achieved the influence over educational thought and policy that Ryerson's did, but it presented a critical challenge that was not easily ignored in a time of rising labour militance.

Graff observes:

> Labour. ..deviated from the major premises of leading schoolmen who sought more education of the working class for greater productivity. Ambivalent about the proper role, form and content of education, recognizing some contradictions, and often placing its benefits and applications quite aside from their jobs, they sought to be free and independent, powerful in ways that would not have pleased the men who desired to have the masses educated .... Their notions of education and the uses of literacy were hardly the same as those of the schoolmen.[44]

The Workman suggested that the sole aim of education should not be to increase the value of capital. [45] One immediate need was education which could help the workers serve the cause of labour.[46] Workers must "educate themselves to think; they must also think for themselves". [47]

Factory Labour

The working class was suffering under the onslaught of capitalist industrial development, which demanded rigor, punctuality disciplined labour. [48] Particularly onerous was the length of the work day, which stood at an average of ten hours, and the working class movement was engaged in a vigourous and militant struggle for a shorter work day. [49] An iron molder wrote in 1875:

> So let us organize, concentrate--our forces, irrespective of trade or profession, and demand eight hours per day,....Let the capitalist call us

> communists or what they will, I would rather be called a communist and have my right, then be called a 'scab' and have no rights at all.[50]"

Without measures to improve the condition of the working class such as a shortened work day, education could only be of limited value and effect. An anonymous worker, "Vincent", wrote in the Labour Union, an organ of the Hamilton Knights of Labour:

> Culture...is a grand thing for the workingman. ...There is often a vast difference, however, between theory and practice; between the ideal and the real....He has to work ten hours a day; sometimes he walks a mile or two before and after work, and saws wood when he comes home. In that case he has not much energy left for culture and education, especially if the children have the whooping cough, and his wife is worn out working. As far as culture is concerned, mental labor, if severe, is worse than bodily labor, as it leaves the mind so exhausted as to be incapable of further effort after the day's work is done. So you can see in the case of severe labor, either bodily or mental for small wages a man's whole existence is necessarily a sacrifice for the means of sustaining mere animal life. All culture or improvement of mind is out of the question .... The object of a labor union is to remove the cause and the necessity for such cases, and to make it possible for a man to live by his labour independently as a man ought to live.[51]

> Hamilton's Palladium of Labor asserted that shorter hours give:

> Opportunities for study and reflection, and mental improvement. They elevate the social and intellectual standing of the laborer. They prevent his being so enervated and depressed by ceaseless toil that all the spirit and manhood is worked out of him and he is ready to submit to anything.[52]

Moreover, mechanization was attacked:

> The continual drive and hurry--the monotonous routine incessant application to tasks which frequently do not of themselves stimulate the faculties or sharpen the intellect if too long continued tends to reduce the modern laborer to the level of the machines among which he works.[53]

Agitate

In view of the harsh conditions of factory labour, it is not surprising that in answer to the demand for loyal, punctual and non-disruptive workers on the part of industrial capitalists, and to the promise to provide them made by Ryerson and his fellow common school promoters, the Palladium of Labor urged workers to:

> Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition and temerity are the weapons which our oppressors have used more effectively against us in the past. Secure an education at any cost, put the ballot to its proper use, and then the ... venerable structure of legal robbery, alias monopoly, will shake to its centre .... [54]

The Palladium found the curriculum of the common schools to be class-biased (e.g. "schools love to dwell too much on the achievements of professional men")[55] and workers must not be seduced by "class" education of this kind. [56] Phillips Thompson, a Toronto radical journalist, observed that the common. schools taught reading, but then gave students "dime novels for perusal, having previously given them a taste for such reading". [57] In Thompson's view, as characterized by Graff, “Such an education--and use of literacy--was hardly desirable; it would not benefit the working class". [58] The Palladium called for a worker who was both a "Reader and a Thinker”.[59]

In summary, various spokesmen for the working class in the 19th century in Canada rejected the theme of domestication and control propounded by Ryerson and other middle class school reformers. They sought an education, and a kind of literacy, which would develop their powers of critical thought and contribute to their independence and power as a class.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 10

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