CHAPTER 12

THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE AS IDEOLOGY

Ideological Incorporation and Social Control

Thus far we have identified two historical periods in which different concerns have dominated thought and policy with regard to adult illiteracy. In each period, the concerns have been expressed in relatively coherent perspectives. The first period was the mid-1800's, during the emergence of the capitalist factory system, and the second dates from the early part of the 20th century, and spans the time of the rise of monopoly capitalism.

In our historical survey, we have found that a common theme running through the dominant perspectives on illiteracy is the use of literacy education as a means of social control and ideological incorporation of the surplus population on behalf of the interests of capitalist elites, particularly during times when members of this stratum of the working class are reacting against intensified economic exploitation. One analytical task which remains is to establish whether this theme can be identified in the third and most recent period of responses to illiteracy, i.e. from the late 1950's to the present day. That is, did the liberal perspective on illiteracy achieve its dominant position because it had practical ideological value for capitalist elites in 'domesticating' the surplus population? In the present chapter, evidence on this question is presented.

Political Challenge

The question before us concerns the nature of the political dynamics which stimulated political elites to intervene in the labour market through the liberal remediation strategy in the post-1950's period. We can obtain some guidance in this matter through examining the situation In the United States, which, like Canada, faced high and persistent levels of unemployment and poverty in the midst of what was a period of relative prosperity. Castells points out that:

> It was in the late 1950's that the first signs of weakness appeared in the "American miracle." The serious economic crisis of 1957-1958 to some degree affected the productivity agreement reached between monopoly

> capital and organized labor, triggering a new wave of strikes. ...Internally, it had become clear that economic growth was not great enough to close the gap between the "mainstream" and the "underdogs." Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty were recognized as structural trends. Racial discrimination was continuing and, more seriously, a black mass movement was. spreading under the theme of civil rights. People started new flights for freedom and life. Class struggle was intensifying.
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> These hidden dangers in American society were more than failures for the for-export model of economic achievement through corporate capitalism. They were potential sources of social disruption, individual violence, political challenge, and autonomous mass organizations. After talking about crime and thinking about political and social stability, one fraction of the ruling class conceived a vast project of institutional reform and social integration in order to improve the productivity of the system through a massive expansion of education and research, and to develop new channels of integration through a program of social organization and public welfare.
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> ....There were some difficulties in the 1960 election, but the fraction of the ruling class organized around Kennedy did win the political battle against short-sighted conservatism. Subsequently, under pressure from the grassroots, a series of reformist policies were put into effect, directed at rationalizing and stabilizing the uneven capitalist development of the United States. Kennedy's new Frontier policies and Johnson's Great Society programs were backed by a much more active state.[1]

There is evidence that a similar economic and political situation prevailed in Canada in the late 1950's and early 1960's Dandurand observes:

> Since about 1957, faced with an economic downturn and an increase in unemployment, attention began. to be focused on the inadequate performance of the labour market. This was not only because of the economic problem that was revealed, but also because the underlying under-employment and disparities between provinces, regions and categories could potentially lead-to social and political problems.[2]

Dandurand's conclusion, that unemployment was perceived as a serious political problem by political elites, is confirmed in the 1961 report of the Special Committee of the Senate on Manpower and Employment. The report referred to the personal costs of unemployment for the individual and the economic costs for society, and then stated:

> Furthermore, the mere awareness that a significant number of people are out of work--and with the modern development of statistics and the means

> of communicating them widespread public awareness is never long delayed--has an adverse effect on social morale and the climate of enterprise. In fact, the number of people without jobs is one of the most common and most important standards used to evaluate the performance of a free society and in the present world of ideological conflict it is hardly an overstatement to say that a high level of employment it is a goal deserving of the utmost priority.[3]

Clearly, the Senators were concerned that fundamental questioning of the capitalist economic system might follow in the wake of high and sustained unemployment.

Later in the 1960's, attention shifted from unemployment to the more multidimensional problem of poverty. Loney notes that elites were concerned about threats to social stability posed by the "increased militancy of the poor and native groups".[4] According to Mann, some among the middle class were frightened "that if things (were) not quickly improved, riots and disturbances like those occurring in the U.S.A. (might) break out in Canada".[5] Of particular concern was the situation in Quebec, where regional inequalities and high unemployment were fueling a growing nationalist movement. Loney observes that there was "increased concern to develop positive initi- actives to strengthen the integrative mechanisms in Canadian society", a concern which was prompted by “the specific and serious threat which political developments in Quebec posed to the maintenance of Canadian federalism”.[6] In 1968, the Economic Council of Canada warned that one of the principal costs of poverty in Canada was that of "controlling the social tensions and unrest associated with gross inequality". The Council registered its belief that “serious poverty should be eliminated in. Canada and that this should be designated as a major national goal”.[7]

Channels of Integration

As in the U.S., the Canadian state responded to the high unemployment, severe inequalities, and the political problems associated with them by adopting various new channels of integration of the poor. It began by adopting an "active manpower policy", including improved labour market information and education and training opportunities under the Technical and Vocational Training Act. Later in the decade, various anti-poverty measures were enacted, among them academic upgrading and Job training under the Canada Manpower Training Program. [8]

Loney argues that while one of the major objectives of the government intervention was that of stimulating productivity, another one was that of exercising social control over dissident groups so as to stabilize the existing political system.[9] However, with regard to the latter objective, he cautions against imputing a "master plan" to elites. He says “the process of government is not so attractively simple”. [10] He quotes Michael Kidron who observes that state intervention has been "in a series of disjointed steps that bear every sign of not representing a coherent attitude", and that

they actually are "a series of ad hoc responses to short-term problems which could not be dealt with in any other way".[11]

Mann supports the view that the anti-poverty programs of the 1960's represented a strategy of social control of the poor on the part of political elites:

> It takes but a superficial analysis of Canadian history to show that our politicians have repeatedly drained off discontent by flowery words, promises and propaganda designed to raise hopes.... It would seem, then, that one major latent function of our anti-poverty campaigns and propaganda is to refine the practice of fending off potential discontent by raising hopes of a new deal just around the corner.[12]

Manpower

With specific regard to the Manpower program, including ABE and Job training, there is evidence that it too was heavily oriented to social control, in spite of its avowed objectives of stimulating greater equality and economic growth. As unemployment levels rose in the early 1970's, the program increasingly became, in Morrison's words, a means of reducing "unemployment (and discontent) seasonally and cyclically among working class people".[13] That is, the objective of achieving economic and political stabilization through absorbing the unemployed during periods of peak unemployment (thereby reducing discontent and lowering official unemployment figures) came to be the dominant one, a conclusion corroborated by the Economic Council of Canada in its 1971 report.[14] In this connection, Dandurand identifies the "overriding function" of Manpower programs:

> The admitted double objective, economics (growth and stability) and equality (of educational opportunity) of a program of technical and vocational training shows up the contradicting interests that the State attempts to reconcile. In this program, the government proposes to contribute from its own resources to increase productivity of the work force and, as a consequence, to ensure increased profit for the owning classes. The objective of equality appears to favor the interests of the workers (and even of the least favored workers) in the labour market. For some people, profitability and economic growth, for others, equality of opportunity; everybody seems to find an advantage. But the overriding function which is not spoken about is neither economic nor a question of fairness: it is a political issue. The principal interest for the employer class is not so much to increase productivity, but at one and the same time to maintain the purchasing power of the unemployed and maintain a social control over that relatively important portion of the labour force (which could potentially be a fertile ground for questioning the economic and political system).[15]

Likewise, Dunn observes:

> A major element of adult education in the past has been to depoliticize situations which would potentially be threatening for the power elite.... Manpower training and restraining programs, of which ABE is but one, themselves serve a depoliticizing function. One of the objectives traditionally ascribed to manpower policy is short-term economic stabilization, or the offsetting of cyclical and seasonal employment fluctuations. Training programs provided, among other things, a focus of activities for the unemployed during times of recession and a method of by-passing them in formulating the "official" unemployment rate. The political function of such programs is obvious. [16]

Dunn and Dandurand clearly point here to the social control function of ABE. However, lest their statements be taken to suggest that ABE as pursued under the Canada Manpower Program has been nothing more than an expedient tool for the economic and political stabilization of the capitalist system in Canada, it must be recalled that the theory and practice of ABE is based on a distinctive theoretical analysis of poverty. The liberal perspective is clearly more than a bare rationalization of ruling class interests. Nevertheless, in spite of its "relative autonomy" in a theoretical sense, the liberal perspective has, like the other perspectives on illiteracy in Canada's past, played an important ideological role. Wachtel highlights this specifically ideological function:

> Manpower programs, educational assistance, and the like are the principal policy results of the contemporary liberal human capital approach to social mobility. All of these programs are based on an essentially untested view of the labor market: namely that personal characteristics over which the individual has control are the major causes of unequal and low incomes. These programs are quite similar in their ideological premise to virtually all the poor laws of capitalist society, starting with the Elizabethan poor laws....The poor are incapable of managing their own affairs so they must be "social worked" to adapt to the rigor and needs of an industrialized and urbanized society. This view of poverty is wrong in theory, in fact, and in social values. The causes of poverty lie outside the individual's control in markets of labor and capital and class background.[17]

Wachtel points out that this approach, i.e. of blaming the poor for their own condition, "has received wide acceptance precisely because it has been conveniently supportive of existing social arrangements and our prevailing social ideology".[18]

Adaptation

To summarize our analysis to this point, there is strong evidence to suggest that the liberal perspective, like other perspectives on illiteracy before it, has achieved its dominant position in ABE policy and practice not because of its scientific validity (which

is in serious question), but rather in large part because of its ideological value for economic and political elites in providing a means of social control of the surplus population. However, one might find it difficult to accept this conclusion for the reason that the liberal perspective doesn't sound ideological in the same sense as the other three perspectives we have considered, which have taken explicitly partisan moral and political positions.

To illustrate this, let us compare statements of adherents of the perspectives from each of the three periods. First, referring to the views of the school reformers of the mid-1800's Prentice states:

> The alternatives to schooling and inculcating discipline in the poor, educators believed, were crime and its associated costs to society. They felt no qualms, therefore, in describing a school system as "a branch of the national police," designed not only to "occupy a large portion of the rising population," but also "to support and restrain many of the grownup. population. " As Edward Scarcest, from Northumberland County, put it in 1863, common schools were the "cheapest form of moral police" that could be established in any count".[19]

The theme of ideological incorporation of the poor is clear in these statements by 19th century schoolmen, as it is in a statement by Fitzpatrick in 1919:

> There is no greater service that a young Canadian university man, undergraduate, professor, lecturer or demonstrator can render our country than that of working in our frontier camps and factories, side by side with both the native-and foreign workmen, for the purpose of convincing them that we are deeply interested in them, teaching them our ideas of citizenship and our ideals of life.[20]

In contrast to these openly ideological sentiments, the views of adherents of the liberal perspective on illiteracy stress seemingly 'neutral' themes of efficiency, technical skills and economic integration. For example, in his evaluation of individualized basic education programs in the Nova Scotia NewStart Corporation, Herzog writes:

> If education is viewed as one element in a manpower adjustment system which includes the individual, the employers, educational and training institutions, facilitative organizations such as unions and manpower agencies, and resources for innovation and educational maintenance, then the appropriate approach to learning is not to compartmentalize the student in a rigid educational mold, but to bring the educational resources to the student in a way that makes it possible for him, through his own free choice, to optimize his career path.[21]

Herzog sounds one of the key themes of the liberal deficiency-remediation perspective--adjustment to the manpower needs of the economy. As presented, this would seem to be a non-partisan, non-political question. However, it must be recognized that in a class-divided society like Canada, the economy is not an undifferentiated 'thing' which is above political and ideological phenomena. In fact, it constitutes the basis of the class power of capitalists, and the question of economic control is central to class conflict. The reference to the need on the part of the poor to "adjust" to the manpower needs of the economy begs the question, "On whose terms?"

The explicitly political and ideological dimension in the liberal perspective is more clearly evident in an account of a project in British Columbia intended to "measure and quantify the effects of life or coping skills on the employability and independence of ABE students", termed Project SQUABEL (The Systematic Quantification of Adult Basic Educational Learning). The report states that:

> SQUABEL hopes to devise an instrument which will measure the unemployability and dependence of institutionally diagnosed-unemployables .... A question sure to arise is: "What criteria are used to develop or formulate questions for the instrument?" With the information obtained from an employer opinion surivey (information is presently being solicited from agencies such as Canada Manpower, Unemployment Insurance, major corporations, and personnel hiring agencies). SQUABEL will be able to delineate in as exact a fashion as possible, those characteristics which employers feel constitute the ideal employee. Already, from the several questionaires returned, a pattern is beginning to develop. In addition to academic skills, which thus far, employers have been rating at an average of 60% in importance, characteristics such as interpersonal relations, motivation, adaptability, punctuality, and so on, have received ratings much higher. ...The. next step in the project will be to present the results of the employer survey to the.ABE faculty members...and obtain from them exactly which of the employer-demanded characteristics are addressed within the scope of the existing Adult Basic Education program. If none of the desired traits are visible within the ABE frame of reference, it will of course, be an obvious indication that ... something is sorely missing in the curriculum and it will be up to the programme faculty to make applicable adjustments.... If the aim of the SQUABEL project is met, the student graduating from future courses in Adult Basic Education will not merely be more academically employable, he or she will have been given the added plus of enhanced independence from social institutions which until now, have been such a permanent fixture in their lives.[22]

In this account, it is clear that “adaptation” to the "needs of the economy" is not a neutral process in a political sense. That is, the matter is approached solely from the point of view of economic elites, and the aim is to help the poor adapt to their needs.

Clearly, critical awareness of political, social and economic reality is not one of the "coping skills" demanded by employers, and in fact, would necessarily run counter to the theme of social control implicit in the traits of “adaptability”, "punctuality" and "motivation". Given this fact, the notion of “enhanced independence” might be more accurately termed "domestication".

Clearly, while the liberal perspective does not openly ‘announce’ its ideological character as earlier perspectives on illiteracy have done, the theme of ideological incorporation and social control is just as strong. In fact, the very facade of neutrality and technical rationality is itself patently ideological. It mystifies and obscures the political and ideological dimensions of language and literacy, and reduces literacy simply to the psychological dimension (i.e. cognitive skills) and the economic dimension (a means of adapting the economy). The denial of the political and ideological dimensions of language and literacy is consistent with the tendency of post World War II liberal social science, which has claimed to have transcended ideology, e.g. the "end of ideology" thesis of sociologist Daniel Bell. [23]

This tendency to technocratic reductionism is termed the. “technical and administrative approach”[24] by Martin, and the “ideology of qualification”[25] by Dundurand.

Human Relations Vs. Technocracy

The liberal perspective underwent some modification after 1972 with the incorporation of ideas and techniques from the "human relations" movement into the ABE component of the Canada Manpower Training Program. These included the lowering of authority ba rriers between instructors and students, the paying of greater attention to the emotional climate of the learning setting, the emphasis on intrinsic need and motivation in learning,, etc. [26] In part, these innovations represented a reaction against the heavy technocratic (“technical and administrative”) orientation of the program up to that time, and an assertion of the broader psychological and social psychological dimensions of education and literacy. To what degree did the new human relations sub-theme serve to modify the "adaptation" or "domestication" thrust of the liberal perspective?

In a 1975 article. entitled “Human Relations in Adult Basic Education: A Curriculum of Student Concerns”, the author, a Canadian ABE instructor, observed that:

> This entire process may be summed up in the notion of responsibility--not the interpretation that implies “shoulds” and "shouldn'ts", obligation and duty, but one that sees responsibility as “the ability to respond” to yourself and your environment, as well as the ability to chose to accept or not accept what is happening with you. A person who is responsible and"response-able" will accept what he does and does not do as an expression of himself, and does not blame others, "the system", or fate for

> what he is. He responds fully to life, with awareness of what is, and acts on free choice, free because they have come from this awareness.[27]

As represented in this statement, the philosophy of human relations is clearly superior to the technocratic approach in that it recognizes the individual as a human subject with a full range of capabilities and needs, and not just as an economic object bent on conformity. However, the notion of an a-contextual "free will" operating above political, economic and social forces is a highly problematical one, and obscures the need of the poor for critical tools to confront the very real "system" which so powerfully impinges on their lives outside of the classroom. Martin observes:

> If one accepts that present social structures in Canada systematically distort human potential, then clearly a commitment to the release of human potential involves critical reflection and political action in some form.[28]

However, the human relations philosophy subordinates the political dimension to the personal one, thus denying it independent effectivity. Individual control over one's personal life is seen as primary--little or no emphasis is placed on collective control over political and economic structures which profoundly limit and shape our field of personal action, and our very aspirations in this regard. Thus, while the human relations approach is often able to counter the adaptation tendency within the context of the social relations of the, classroom, it is largely ineffective outside of this limited setting. For example, Martin argues:

> The primary technical difficulty faced by educators engaged in human relations programs is that of following up, the problem of integrating learning from intensive small group sessions into the living situation of each participant. The obstacles to maintaining frank and honest exchange among people in a highly competitive social system are generally so great that learning from such groups is suppressed by the participants very soon after the "artificial" training environment is dissolved.[29]

The human relations approach represents an advance over the technocratic one within ABE programs, but because it offers few tools and little support for critical analysis and collective action with regard to larger political and economic forces, it leads to the same practical result--adaptation of the poor to the structure of inequality. For this reason, many adult educators have found the human relations approach inadequate. Martin points out that:

> The ‘human relations movement’ became a significant force in Canadian adult education during the late 1960's, aiming at renewal of the field as the counterculture with which it was associated aimed at a renewal of society. In only a few years, much of the counter-culture had been

> smothered and commercialized to the point where it represents no serious effort to change Canada's social structure; and some of the visionaries of the 'human relations movement' can now be found conducting seminars for major corporations and government departments, oiling the organizational machinery which they used to speak of transforming. More socially critical adult educators who used to be associated with the movement have since moved to more explicitly political positions, leaving the area largely to those who see it as a set of “neutral” techniques.[30]

In summary, while the human relations approach supplied a valuable corrective to the technocratic emphasis of the liberal perspective-particularly in downgrading the role of external rules and authority and emphasizing intrinsic needs, motivations and feelings in the ABE classroom--it failed to provide an effective alternative to the theme of adaptation and domestication. Even as modified by human relations concepts, the liberal perspective remains as oriented to social control and ideological incorporation of the poor as any of the earlier perspectives on illiteracy.

A Critical Alternative

Like earlier perspectives on illiteracy put forward by middle class educators, the liberal perspective on illiteracy has achieved and retained a dominant position with regard to thought and policy in large part. because of its ideological utility for capitalist elites. As well, like other earlier perspectives, the liberal one has been challenged by an alternative perspective on illiteracy, which directly addresses the needs and interests of the working class, particularly its most exploited stratum--the poor. As we have seen, adherents of the present critical perspective on illiteracy attack the core theme of the liberal perspective, the adaptation approach. For example, Belanger writes:

> Underlying the ideas of continuing education are two entirely different concepts. The adaptive concept sees people as a captive audience, ready to sit on the school bench all their lives to learn what they must know to become better integrated. They will be caught up in an endless race to acquire skills that are constantly becoming obsolete .... It is clear that the democratically-minded, unable to accept this concept, will offer a different perspective, that of liberating communities and liberating the individual.
>
> The current debate on literacy training policies is part of a broader issue: the basic orientation of a country's educational efforts. Literacy training will be either an ongoing adjustment of the less skilled sector of the labour force to the needs of the prevailing economic structure, or a complementary tool for the majority of the people, to improve their control over their environment and develop their production capacity, without losing control over the fruits of their labour.[31]

The critical perspective offers a clear and fundamental choice for adult basic educators -- adapt at ion or liberation. Belenger says, “we must question the very values of our educational policies, which have hitherto been developed as if in a vacuum of neutrality”.[32]

Summary and Conclusions

To this point we have identified three distinct historical periods in which different elite concerns have dominated viewpoints and programming with regard to adult illiteracy. In each of them, the concerns have been expressed in relatively coherent perspectives as developed by educators. The first period was the mid-1800's, when the crime, pauperism and social disruption which accompanied the drive to mould a landless agricultural workforce to the rhythm and demands of the emerging capitalist factory system in Upper Canada was of growing concern to middle class and upper class elements. Educators identified adult illiteracy as the source of the 'immorality', and this perspective was an important factor in the establishment of universal public schooling, providing literacy training for future members of the industrial proletariat.

The second period dates from the early part of the 20th century, and spans the time of the rise of monopoly. capitalist enterprise. Two relatively distinct but related perspectives emerged at this time, both responding to the social problems arising out of the intensified exploitation of the new surplus population of unskilled laborers. The first one, which developed in the 1899 to 1907 period, included a limited critique of the harsh employment practices of frontier camps and a limited advocacy of the material interests of the predominantly Anglo-Canadian workers. However, it identified the lack of means of self-improvement during non-working hours in the camps as the main cause of the "moral diseases" of workers, such as crime, slackened productivity and pauperism, and prescribed literacy education to prevent them. The second perspective, which arose after 1907, particularly focused on the situation of unskilled immigrant workers, often illiterate in the English language, who largely replaced Anglo-Canadians as the main pool of unskilled labour. Frequently these workers reacted against the harsh social and economic conditions which greeted them in Canada by supporting radical political movements. Adult educators and others characterized this response (which was of deep concern to political and economic elites) as the consequence of their failure to become assimilated to dominant Canadian values and Institutions, to become “Canadianized”, as a result of cultural isolation imposed by illiteracy and lack of education. They promoted literacy and language classes to make this assimilation possible.

The third period of responses to illiteracy commenced in late 1950's, when illiteracy was signed out as a prime causal factor in the persistent unemployment and poverty which followed in the wake of a long period of rapid but extremely uneven growth in the Canadian economy after World War II. The federal government responded by funding academic upgrading and job training, first under the Technical and Vocational Training Act of 1960, and then under the Adult Occupational Training Act of 1967--the latter forming the basis of the Canada Manpower Training Program. Other Initiatives influenced by this perspective, i.e. the liberal perspective on illiteracy, have included the numerous literacy and A8E programs implemented after 1960 by a

variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations. The liberal perspective remains dominant to the present day.

Contradictory Objectives

When we inquire as to the nature and timing of the historical periods which have given rise to new perspectives on illiteracy, it is apparent that they have not been random or accidental; rather, they have been successive phases in the 'normal', i.e. uneven and contradictory, development of the capitalist system in Canada. They have been initiated by major transitions in the accumulation process, including its consolidation vis a vis another mode of production, its deepening or its widening.

Paradoxically, it has been during these periods of rapid expansion and development that the capitalist system has undermined one of the very foundations of its existence--the capacity of its cultural and social institutions to reproduce a willing and obedient class of wage labourers. That is, accompanying the intensified production of wealth during these periods, there has also been an intensified production of unemployment and poverty. Depending upon factors like the state of cooperation and leadership within the working class, its ideological mobilization, its resources for combat, etc., the reaction of the most oppressed stratum of the working class (which, not coincidently, suffers most from illiteracy) has taken on increasingly system threatening forms. The nature of the reaction has tended to move from individual forms like alcoholism, family breakdown, etc., toward collective. forms, including unorganized ones like criminality, absenteeism from work and insubordination in the workplace, to more organized ones like strikes and support for radical political movements.

In response, the capitalist class and the capitalist state have strengthened their hold, where necessary through coercive meant involving the repressive mechanisms of the army, police and courts, but more usually through the complementary ideological mechanisms which secure the active consent (or at least passive resignation) of the surplus population to the established structure of inequality. It has been in the latter approach--the ideological legitimation of the existing order, that literacy training and basic education have played a small, but at times significant role in Canadian history.

The perspectives on illiteracy which have become dominant in these periods have emerged out of the alliance of middle class educators with economic and political elites. They have primarily reflected the needs and interests of the latter, particularly their need to reestablish the reproduction of class relations on a firmer basis in the face of growing militance on the part of the surplus population stratum of the working class. Each perspective has embodied a strategy of closer ideological incorporation of exploited groups within dominant institutions through some form of literacy or basic education. To this end, each has held out certain concessions to the hopes and aspirations of the working class, such as increased avenues for social and cultural advancement and intellectual enrichment.

The way that the perspectives have attempted to reconcile these contradictory objectives --i.e. increased social control over the working class on the part of the capitalist class, and economic and social advance for the working class--has been through locating the source of the conflict and oppression within exploited groups, i.e. their lack of literacy skills, lack of knowledge, lack of adherence to dominant values, etc., and offering a route to social advance through correcting that deficiency. While the working class has made certain limited gains through such a strategy, the strategy has been incapable of compensating for the larger political economic forces creating poverty and exploitation, and the collective situation of the surplus population has remained the same. However, the strategy has reaped important gains for capitalist political and economic elites in that the poor have been diverted from critically questioning the political economic structures of capitalism and from seeking collective solutions to their problems. The strategy has contributed to renewed hope on the part of the poor that advance is possible through these structures, thus legitimating them and dampening class conflict.

Adult Literacy

As we have seen, perspective on illiteracy formulated during the mid-1800's directly led to the development of common schools for the children of Upper Canada, but there has been no similar long-range institutional response to the problem of adult illiteracy. Programs responding to it have never grown large enough or lasted long enough to reach the majority of illiterate adults, and illiteracy rates have remained substantial over time.

Elite support for adult literacy programs has tended to coincide with the immediate threat to the existing order posed by the marginal groups to which illiterate adults belong. Unlike childhood education, which mainly aims for long-range intergenerational effects, adult literacy education directly absorbs those adults who are currently most exploited, and therefore potentially the most dangerous to the established order. Therefore, such programs have been "thrown into the breech" in times of crisis, when these adults have become most restive. However, once the crisis of control and legitimacy has subsided, elite support for literacy education has faded as well. This has imparted a "boom and bust" quality to efforts to deal with adult illiteracy in Canada.

This variation in the level of elite support can be explained by the fact that although the capitalist class is able to sponsor a strategy of incorporation of exploited groups in order to resolve an immediate crisis, in the long run they cannot continue to do so because the capitalist accumulation process periodically requires a super-exploited stratum of workers. To support a long term strategy of elimination of that stratum would be to undermine the very economic structure upon which their existence

as a class depends. However useful such a strategy may be for them in the short term, it is out of step with their long-range interests.

For their part, mainstream adult basic educators have not recognized the contradiction which lies at the heart of. their strategy of incorporation of the surplus population into existing capitalist institutions. Thus, for example, when elite support for their efforts has subsided, adult educators have tended to ascribe this to a lack of public awareness of the severity of the problem of adult illiteracy. The flaw in this interpretation is that it overlooks the fact that such periodic unawareness on the part of economic and political elites is 'caused'. and not simply accidental.

Alternative Perspectives

What have been described above are the dominant responses to illiteracy in Canadian history, the ones which have commanded the greatest attention and commitment of resources. It has been the interests of the capitalist class which have had the greatest weight in their development. However, as we have seen, during each period educators have been confronted by alternative perspectives formulated by Individuals, organizations and movements seeking to organize and mobilize members of subordinate classes in the face of intensified exploitation brought on by a shift in the accumulation process.

In contrast with the dominant perspectives, the alternative (subordinate) ones have identified the economic structures of capitalism, and not illiteracy, as the source of poverty and its associated social problems. Their adherents have valued the capacity for critical thought and collective political action as much as the simple possession of the skills of reading and writing. Their sources have included the labour movement in Upper Canada in the 19th century, the Ukrainian socialist movement in the early decades of the 20th century, and the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, as it has informed and inspired literacy and language programs for the surplus population beginning in the early 1970's.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 12

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