

Review

Lindsay Paterson (2015) *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education*, St Andrews, Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, 310 pages, Paperback £19.95.

This book will be useful to anyone interested in understanding the history of liberal education in general and, more specifically, for those interested in how liberal *adult* education was interpreted and developed by radical social and educational reformers in the first half of the twentieth century. Putting this history together is, in my opinion, a really helpful contribution that students, educators and academics will find particularly beneficial. The fact that the author is an exceptionally clear, concise and authoritative writer adds to its value. Because of my own interest in adult education, I will focus on this specific dimension rather than liberal education and schooling, which the book also addresses. Another justification for this is that, as Paterson points out, liberal education was more often discussed in the context of adult education than it was in schooling.

Liberal education as a set of ideas and values, is established by reference to some key figures such as Newman on universities, Arnold on culture and Leavis on literature. Their concerns for freedom of thought, the search for truth through detached study, intellectual rigour and the willingness to make judgements regarding quality, identify some of the key themes of liberal education. The focus was, of course, on the individual and the role of liberal education in shaping ‘men’ (sometimes women) of character. The contributions of these early thinkers provides the backdrop to how the ‘great tradition’ took on a socially purposeful commitment, in the work of reforming socialists like Tawney, Laski and Cole. Faith in reason was, in their view, the same as being a civilised socialist, particularly during the period of the 1930s with the rise of fascism in Europe and Soviet totalitarianism. Tawney’s role in the development of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) is probably the best remembered. Nevertheless, along with Laski, Cole and others this trio were interested in the growth of democracy and educational experiences appropriate for it. Whilst the WEA was the

main vehicle for liberal adult education, the author includes educational work within the armed forces, reading (and the Left book club in particular), as well as educational radio programmes. It should be noted that liberal education, for these socialists, was not something simply for a working-class elite but of potential benefit to all denied a proper education, who would then be able to make a positive contribution to their communities. What unified this ideologically diverse group of founders was the importance of a civilising cultural tradition; where they differed, was in relation to who they thought could benefit from it and what type of social order was needed to develop it.

The book is also an account of how this commitment to the principles of liberal education was gradually abandoned by those on the Left. Two key figures, bridging the old liberal education tradition of the WEA but with greater critical distance from it, are Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, who both entered adult education in the post-1945 period. It is in relation to Williams' role that I think the book will find a number of dissenting voices. Paterson firmly locates Williams in the lineage of adult education as access to the 'great tradition', but his commitment to this was not uncritical and perhaps changed over time. Although Williams clearly rejected a crude Marxist view of literature as merely bourgeois, his account of the 'selective tradition' and the need to widen cultural traditions to include working-class values and institutions, was central to his socialism.

In chapter five, the ideas which shaped the movement away from the liberal tradition are developed firstly, through Pierre Bourdieu's work in general, primarily because of his significance and impact on educational thinking on the left and, secondly, in rejecting Basil Bernstein's influence on the sociology of education, with specific reference to language codes. After critical engagement with Bourdieu and Bernstein, the author steps up the challenge by addressing intellectual and cultural relativism, critics of academic elitism, trends in cultural studies, the new Left, aspects of multiculturalism which, despite their broad ideological sympathy to progressive social change, have unwisely abandoned the central tenets of liberal thinking, and the commitment to a common culture which earlier adult educators held dear. There is

much in Paterson's criticisms that provide insight as well as providing opportunities for critical rejoinders.

In the final chapter, Paterson suggests there are now some signs on the Left of a return to liberal principles. He sees this in relation to women's emancipation and the struggle for fundamental human rights. He is also approving of Michael Young's auto-critique of arguments that promoted the sociology of knowledge, and its role in privileging subordinate knowledge claims over official knowledge. If we are to make a better world, then we need to be able to distinguish between different kinds of arguments about how things can be changed for the better. Rather optimistically, perhaps, the author claims that one of the outcomes of this long process in the first half of the twentieth century has been that liberal universalism is now commonly accepted in society.

Many of the above arguments will cut little ice with a range of intellectual positions, the most obvious deriving from authors who write from post-colonial positions, feminists (despite the claim above about women's emancipation), queer theorists, disability activists and so on. Moreover, outside the scope of the text there is another, neglected tradition, of adult education for social change which is not referenced. This tradition of radical community-based adult education, in alliance with social and urban movements, has historically been engaged in developing 'really useful knowledge' (the product of collective experience, critical study and social action). This radical tradition has been influenced by a wide variety of critical perspectives on society whilst not being reduced to any, and has attempted to develop a wide and open curriculum to enhance the collective interests of exploited and marginalised social groups, but was never wedded to a view of social change as an outcome of universal reason. In Scotland, the impact of this tradition was felt to some degree in the creation of the profession of community education in the 1970s, and the democratic imperative, which initially shaped it. Its history has yet to be written.

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