

Early Twentieth Century Radicalism in Community Education and the Socialist Sunday School Movement.

David Kitchener, University of Bolton.

The significance of education as a hegemonic discourse based on economic determinants applied to maintain the status quo is well documented, (e.g. Friere, 1970; Hill and Cole, 2001; McLaren, and Baltodano, 2000; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993). Similarly, early cultural theorists such as Max Horkheimer (1974) with Theodore Adorno (1979) and Louis Althusser (1969) provide nuanced arguments explaining how the striving for economic success as a liberating force may be a myth and may even be a process of enslavement. It is in reaction to the personal experiencing of such a capitalist exploitative discourse that Mary Gray began the Socialist Sunday School movement in 1892. Mary helped feed children in a soup kitchen during a London dock strike and felt there was an imperative to provide educational opportunities informed and shaped by a socialist agenda to help counter the misery of their existence.

The movement rapidly evolved as a national reaction to the traditional Victorian and soon Edwardian Christian Sunday approach of obedience to an omnipotent God. As posed by the declaration of the soon to be organised National Association of Socialist Sunday Schools: 'Do you realise that the false ideals of a capitalist society are reflected in the teaching of our day schools and orthodox Sunday schools?' And this was no minority movement: industrialised parts of Scotland were particularly receptive with 83 schools in Glasgow recorded between 1896 and 1932, Edinburgh listed 16 between 1909 and 1932, with one each in 1909 in each of Motherwell, Perth, Kilmarnock and Paisley. The National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools Union was formed in 1909 when Caroline Martyn and Archie McArthur opened a

school in Glasgow. In South Wales, there was one in Aberdare (1918) and Barry with three (1909, 1915, 1918) all becoming established centres. Yorkshire was particularly active with 126 Schools opened between 1909 and 1932; 126 were recorded in London and all over the North and Midlands in main conurbations such as Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Derby Wigan, and Sheffield there were flourishing centres. Jeffs and Smith (2002) noted how they flourished but suggested that many had a fleeting existence though the data collated for this article suggests otherwise: the log books recording correspondence and meetings between schools and regions over several years. There was an American dimension too with the Bronx (1909), Boston (1909) and St. Louis (1912) having connections to the UK movement. Here was a genuine appetite and belief in the creation of a new and fairer society based on shared wealth ownership expressed thus:

We desire to be just and loving to all, our fellow men and women, to work together as brothers and sisters, to be kind to every living creature and so help form a New Society with Justice as its foundation and Love, its law’.

To have such a carefully worded declaration illustrates not only a commonality of belief but also a high level of coordination and structure. Groups nationally could contribute to the *Young Socialist* newspaper, which began in 1901, and was available at all centres. On joining a School, there was a Certificate of Welcome, which framed the principles by which the school would be guided:

We the children of the Socialist Sunday school welcome you as a scholar and as a worker for the cause of socialism. We, the children of today, ask you to help us to make the world a happier place for the children of tomorrow.

Clearly, an ideological stance, but worthy of note too is the fervour to help create a better future world. This was no self - seeking project attempting the pursuit or enhancement of material circumstances, but one shaped by a vision of a grander, more

decent, fairer and equal society for all. Regional collectives sometime created their own constitutional statements. For example the Lancashire and Cheshire Union of Socialist Schools aimed;

To assist in the work of Socialism. To instil in all well founded knowledge that will provide for communal welfare and which shall be non-theological in character, paying exclusive attention to the present life and to its duties; such teaching shall be anti-militaristic in character.

This strong statement reflects concern about the growth of fascism, being written in 1933, and there might have been some interesting discussion about the Spanish Civil War.

There is an irony that there were ten 'commandments' with its religious connotations, number 3 perhaps being unintentionally contradictory to socialism. There has been discussion that the schools were influenced and sometimes 'housed' within the Labour Church movement (Reid, 1966), Hobsbawn (1971) dismissing them merely as 'labour sects'. However, given the evidence in the Salford collection of revolutionary fervour and clear connections to Marxism, this strikes me as a rather harsh interpretation. The commandments were as follows:

1. Love your schoolfellows, who will be your fellow workmen in life.
2. Love learning, which is the food of the mind; be as grateful to your teacher as to your parents.
3. Make every day holy by good and useful deeds and kindly actions.
4. Honour good men, be courteous to all men, bow down to none.
5. Do not hate or speak evil of anyone. Do not be revengeful but stand up for your right and resist oppression.
6. Do not be cowardly. Be a friend to the weak and love justice.
7. Remember that all good things of the earth are produced by labour. Whoever enjoys them without working for them is stealing the bread of the workers.

8. Observe and think in order to discover the truth. Do not believe what is contrary to reason and never deceive yourself or others.
9. Do not think that he who loves his own country must hate and despise other nations, or wish for war, which is a remnant of barbarism.
10. Look forward to the day when all men and women will be free citizens of one fatherland and live together as brothers and sisters in peace and righteousness.

For those who see that one important purpose of education is as a catalyst in informing a fairer and more decent world, the list still resonates with incredible power. The force and conviction behind such ideas remains inspirational. It would be interesting to see what the present Secretary of State for Education would make of number 7 as a national curriculum statement!

The term 'hymns' also suggests religious connections or some sort of overlap between Christian and socialist beliefs and there was a national Hymn Book with an accompanying tune book. There are overlaps here between the Tom Anderson inspired Proletarian Sunday schools in Clydeside, Glasgow who had the Proletarian Song Book, 'song' making an important distinction to 'hymn', Clydeside being an early centre for radical revolutionary activities. Interestingly in Glasgow, there was still as late as 1957 a Socialist Sunday School Song Book in use. Sometimes hymns had a strident rhetoric reflecting the uncompromising revolutionary spirit for change as with 'Learning to be good rebels':

*We're a band of little Comrades
Walking in the path of truth;
We are marching onward, onward,
Through the flowery land of youth.
Marching onward up to Manhood,
When we mean to join the fight,
Of the weak against oppression,
In the battle for the right.*

To return to the sect interpretation, such rhetoric has similarities to say Onward Christian Soldiers (sings to the same tune) in the fervour for some undefined concept of righteousness, but there is no quasi-religious undertone to the above, 'Comrades' being deliberately chosen as the preferred term. Socialist Sunday schools were an alternative to the Christian Sunday school experience and had a distinctive character of their own.

The National Association of Socialist Sunday Schools provided guidance as to how children were taught and referred directly to the work of Johann Herbart (1911) and Friedrich Froebel (1826). For Herbart, it was the emphasis on a form of pedagogical realism, ideas of learning being based on structured and logical steps, which are connected, and opportune insight via practical experiences, but informed by holistic ideas of educating the whole person within a moral framework. Fröbel maybe a more problematic source as his view was that education should be an avenue towards harmony with the world through a connection to God. The attraction appears to be his emphasis on environments that had a practical base for learning and involved working with real materials. George Whitehead of the Hyde Socialist Sunday School Committee summarised such ideas as principles of, 'individual interest' and graduated lessons'. The teaching should 'engender discussion' and 'encourage questions and expression of opinion' with an attempt to 'make lessons synthetic so that ideas are correlated and orderly' and 'relate to the narrative (body referred to) in as dramatic a manner as possible'. Lessons should also encourage 'individual unfoldment'.

As an early twentieth century model, this is pedagogically radical in that it advocates what we would now describe as a 'child-centred' approach and would have contrasted sharply with the didactic delivery of the period, children being invited to question and explore rather than be told. The National Association were highly critical of the weekly schooling experience, arguing that it was based on, 'empire building, military arrogance, false ideas as to what should constitute manly dignity by giving inflated values to royal personages, history dealing mainly with the sanguinary exploits of kings and queens'. There was to be no corporal punishment or 'indeed punishment of any kind, as being worse than useless'. The framework was to be an understanding of

a 'belief in good and useful living', guidance to 'show them their relationship to the community' and 'how their lives are part of the collective life'. Also, and very importantly, there was to be an emphasis on understanding as to 'how their actions help to form present and future society'.

Education was clearly shaped to a specific viewpoint but it would be wrong to view it as insular, Roof (1935:27) noted, *'the Socialist Sunday School, apart from its ethical Sunday teaching, has associated with it rambling, swimming, cricket and football clubs. There are also sub-sections for dramatics, handicrafts, needlework and folk-dancing'*. Further evidence as to the extent to which the schools had a community role is that they had their own baptism procedures, described by The National Association as the 'welcome and naming of a child'. The service was one of an immersion into principles of justice and equality, rather than the Kingdom of God. Marriages were also conducted, though this was legally more complex, and the Association recommended contacting a 'sympathetic minister of a Unitarian or other non-conformist church' to conduct the service. Occasionally, there might be two services, one as a Socialist event followed by one delivered by a church denomination, the Registrar only recognising the legality of a state sanctioned organisation. Lastly, schools could also arrange and conduct funerals by liaising with local authorities. All this suggests a vibrancy and community ethos driven by a passion for an alternative ideological identity, which community or informal education leading and shaping social change.

There is evidence, for example in the Clydeside area, of Socialist Sunday Schools continuing after the Second World War but this was rare, the movement having then lost its momentum. The successful fight against fascism and the post-war rebuilding under the Atlee Labour government created new directions and opportunities for socialist movements, for example the creation of The National Health Service and the nationalisation of some parts of industry. Ewan (2012), in her exhibition of Glasgow's alternative schools - the Proletarian, Socialist Sunday and Socialist Fellowship schools - calculates that the Socialist Sunday schools ended in 1965 and then become part of Socialist Fellowship from 1965-1980.

They were of a particular time but never the less, should be celebrated as significant and important as a model education for social change. Compared with today's neoliberal models of education based on myths of improvement by competition, 'choice' and marketisation, the Socialist Sunday School Movement offered a vision of co-operation, free expression and concern for the welfare of others – values almost entirely missing from current educational policy.

I'm indebted to the Working Class Movement Library in Salford archive from which the data for this article was collated.

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