

Cultural Studies and radical popular education: Resources of hope

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Tom Steele** 

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Abstract

This article takes up the theme that a significant but often ignored source for British Cultural Studies began in the interdisciplinary teaching of the Workers' Educational Association and university extra-mural departments in the immediate post-Second World War years. I deepen this argument by outlining the history of 'popular education' in Europe and beyond in the modern period to illustrate how the coming together of subaltern political movements and intellectual inquiry created an independent public sphere of radical self-enlightenment. In this article, by utilising archival and textual sources, I should like to explore whether it may be possible to renew the original project of Cultural Studies through radical programmes of 'popular' adult education in the digital age. I see Jim McGuigan's work as offering 'resources of hope', in Raymond Williams' phrase, for this tradition in the universe of academic Cultural Studies.

Keywords

Adult education, cultural studies, education, popular culture, radical education

Introduction: culture is ordinary

This article takes up the theme argued in Steele (1997) that a significant but often ignored source for British Cultural Studies was to be found in the interdisciplinary teaching of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and university extra-mural departments in the years following the Second World War. In his last writings, Raymond Williams, the subject of Jim McGuigan's (2019) most recent work, reiterated his belief, so well-articulated in his essay 'Culture is Ordinary', that culture was not a top-down business to be

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distributed to a working class 'in deficit' but a constant business of communal renewal in the institutions and practices of everyday life. He saw his own work in adult education as 'politics by other means' (Williams, 1979: 69).

I see the work of Jim McGuigan and his colleagues as a dynamic reflection of this tradition in the universe of academic Cultural Studies. McGuigan's combative tone, groundedness in everyday life and class and gendered responses, scepticism towards over-theoretical approaches, refusal of the easy populism of some theorists, and assertion of the materiality of culture and the importance of cultural policy, while subtly reflecting on the nature of symbolic interaction, reflect a continued impulse to position Cultural Studies as a political project.

The education of the working class is still, as my old District Secretary at the Yorkshire (North) WEA, Fred Sedgwick, would say, an 'unfinished business'. But now, with the historic industrial labour *movement* a distant memory, where are important sources of renewal and hope? Williams believed they could be found in the new social movements which pursue a reflexive communal education for political engagement. McGuigan's work, I believe, offers us important clues to the direction of travel for a renewed 'popular education', which is neither the harsh work-disciplining of what Williams called the 'industrial trainers' nor the paternalist 'Cultural' initiations of the old Liberal Studies tradition but a creative and critical learning for radical change.

In this article, I should like to pursue this contention by utilising archival and textual sources and explore whether it may be possible to renew the original project of Cultural Studies through radical programmes of 'popular' adult education. In order to deepen the argument, I outline a history of popular education movements in Europe and beyond since the Enlightenment (taken from my book *Knowledge is Power! The Rise and Fall of European Popular Education Movements, 1848–1939* (Steele, 2007) to make the case that the coming together of working-class political movements and intellectual inquiry created an independent public sphere of self-enlightenment linked to radical change (Habermas, 1989).

Adult education and British cultural studies

The familiar account of British Cultural Studies, as an academic subject emerging out of Birmingham University's Department of English, tells only half the story (Green, 1982). While the Birmingham Department may have been a midwife, and the publisher Allen Lane's funding the necessary lubricant for Richard Hoggart's founding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) in 1964, the project of cultural studies begins much earlier, in the experimentation, interdisciplinarity and political commitment of adult education immediately before and after the Second World War (Steele, 1997). The new post-war generation of tutors in adult education, some with engagements with Leavisism, some with European sociology, some with linguistic philosophy and others with Marxist social history and cultural theory, came into the often newly founded departments of university adult education at a moment of high promise for popular education, when it seemed that their occupation could be instrumental to the regeneration of a democratic, socially just New Britain. While the pre-war class order seemed fatally crippled, so did the old class politics, the popular front against fascism in the 1930s

having suggested a new kind of political struggle, not so much at the point of production, as at the point of representation.

In one of his last attempts at putting the record straight, Raymond Williams (1989) noted,

[W]hen I moved into internal university teaching, when at about the same time Richard Hoggart did the same, we started teaching in ways that had been absolutely familiar in Extra Mural and WEA classes, relating history to art and literature, including contemporary culture, and suddenly so strange was this to the Universities they said 'My God, here is a new subject called Cultural Studies'. But we are beginning I am afraid, to see encyclopaedia articles dating the birth of Cultural Studies from this or that book in the late 'fifties. Don't believe a word of it. That shift of perspective about the teaching of arts and literature and their relation to history and to contemporary society began in Adult Education, it didn't happen anywhere else. (p. 162)

He believed that what he and others were doing was not so much founding a new academic subject area but contributing to the process of social change itself. Williams believed that cultural studies began as a political project of popular education among adults.

Stuart Hall (1990) supported this, noting that cultural studies in the 1950s emerged from the centre of the political debate about how British society was changing and 'was at this time identified with the first New Left' (p. 12). Moreover, he adds, 'I myself was working as an extra mural teacher, once I left the university of Oxford in and around London' (Hall, 1990: 12):

We thus came from a tradition entirely marginal to the centers (sic) of English academic life, and out of an engagement in the questions of cultural change—how to understand them, how to describe them, and how to theorize them, what their impact and consequences were to be, socially—were first reckoned within the dirty outside world. (Hall, 1990: 12)

The historian, Edward (EP) Thompson, also located the pioneering of the new intellectual currents in adult education. He noted that many outstanding historians – Tawney, Cole, Beales and Briggs, for example – had been closely tied to the adult education movement, which had allowed the new social history to fill out areas wholly neglected by university departments of history. Furthermore, the experience of adult education had been able at times to subtly and radically modify the whole educational process:

Areas of study long neglected, and, in some places, still neglected – in university history schools were explored over several decades in university tutorial classes: and today one may still see new offshoots of social history – in local history, in industrial archaeology, in the history of industrial relations, and in that area of cultural studies pioneered in this country by Richard Hoggart – the initiatives for which have often come 'from below', from the adult class and the adult tutor, and not from the academic schools. (Thompson, 1968: 1)

Richard Hoggart also confirmed the general tenor of these observations, but, by contrast with Thompson and Williams, his own involvement in adult education was less politically motivated. From a working-class family in Hunslet, his concerns had been

more closely tied to anxieties about the decline of community, the family and working-class values and more significantly about his own alienation from the community he was raised in. The 'scholarship boy' was always more centred on the mystery of his own difference than the long march of labour or the formation of a 'common culture', a term of which he was always rather suspicious. In a sense what he discovered in 'literature' both released him from some of the narrowness of this life but also contained him in a world of symbolic values. He became more concerned with reading the signs of the times, which he saw as a logical extension of Leavis' work, than with Williams' work of cultural materialism or Thompson's theorised social history. He focused particularly on popular culture:

I'd been teaching for about five or six years WEA and extension classes. Anyone who was serious about that sort of work – and there were a great number of us at that time who were engaged in the writings of Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group and Denys Thompson and Mrs. Leavis – had a special interest in popular culture. It was more than that, it was also mass culture. (Quoted in Corner, 1991: 139)

For Hoggart, the peculiarity of students in adult education was his belief that they were more exposed to the world of newspapers, radio and pop songs than the privileged undergraduates of his day. There was, he said, 'a side interest in making sense of that among extra-mural tutors' (Corner, 1991: 139).

It is clear, however, from Hoggart's description that the teaching of English had been a key site for adult education tutors who were concerned with the social relevance of their work. In fact, it was a location of intense ideological conflict throughout the inter-war years, and, in important ways, one's stance over English teaching was a sign of political commitment. Undoubtedly, the Leavises had brought to the subject a number of elements adult education tutors could find congenial. Close reading of texts, a moral stance, contextual relevance, scorn of dilettante literary history and biographic detail and, of course, dangerous DH Lawrence conspired with the all-important combative tone of Leavisism to create an oppositional climate for those convinced that culture had a political value. Moreover, Leavis' attack on metropolitan literary fashion, as well as the loathed Bloomsbury hegemony, enhanced the feeling of the marginal vitality of adult education, the feeling that cultural renewal would come from 'below' and from the 'border country', be it Wales, or Yorkshire, rather than the London élites. 'Leavis' was a sign for the shock troops of English studies.

Much of this grounded approach came from vigorous and occasionally acrid debates within the WEA in the 1930s led by the redoubtable George (G.H.) Thompson, the WEA's District Secretary in Yorkshire (North), 1914–1945. George Thompson (1938) wrote a celebrated pamphlet for the WEA called the 'The Field of Study for WEA Classes'. He argued first that the working-class student did not require an overly abstract approach to any subject. Whatever was taught had to first of all relate to the student's life and experience and only when that contact had been established could more abstract matters be broached. Second, the approach should be 'sociological'; it should enable the student to see how his or her life related to social conditions, not in a simply determined sense but in an activist sense to see how social conditions could be changed in line with

justice and equity. Thompson was quite impatient with conventional academic divisions of knowledge. He wrote,

Whatever the purpose of study elsewhere, it seems to me that in the WEA the study of one subject should not only give an understanding of that subject but be a gateway through which a vista should be glimpsed of the importance of other subjects. A subject encased within the high walls of specialisation whether of subject matter or of theory – economic, scientific, aesthetic, leads I believe, up a blind alley. (Thompson, 1939: n.p.)

‘Interdisciplinarity’, as this was later to be called, was thus a key feature for George Thompson of the WEA approach, as it was subsequently to be of academic cultural studies. It was this Yorkshire cultural/political environment that EP Thompson (no relation to, and a class divide from, George) entered in 1948, when he joined the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Leeds and based himself in Halifax.

Although in the pre-Second World War years the national leadership of the WEA in London (spurred on by W.E. Williams, the editor of the WEA’s journal, *The Highway*, and editor-in-chief of Penguin Books) had become increasingly embarrassed by the class-warriors of the provinces, like George Thompson, after the war, there is no doubt they welcomed the new ‘cultural’ turn. W.E. Williams (no relation to Raymond) was instrumental in publishing the path-breaking works by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson in the Penguin and Pelican imprints, while later persuading Allen Lane to fund the Birmingham Centre for British Cultural Studies (Hoggart, 1992: 89–90).

The educational practices which came to be called ‘Cultural Studies’ then seem to emerge at a critical juncture after the Second World War. To summarise, the arguments over literature and arts teaching in the period up to Second World War signalled that they were a politically sensitive arena within which notions of Englishness and class were being fought out. In the literary critical academy, English studies was the place where ‘Englishness’ itself was being consecrated (Doyle, 1989). For Leavis and his followers, they were to be the centre of the humanising mission in opposition to official Cambridge literature and metropolitan literary culture. It was well understood by adult education tutors that successful teaching began with the life experiences of their students and not abstract theory or generally promoting notions of ‘spirituality’. The sociological attitude was strongly encouraged and the interdisciplinarity which was largely due to starting from the needs of the students rather than the formal disciplines of the subject allowed tutors and class members the space to indulge in constructing imaginatively different kinds of relationships between academic subjects and learners.

‘Politics by other means’

Many of those who became sensitive to the possibilities offered by the new ‘cultural struggle’ were recruited within a few years of each other to university adult education departments, Williams to the Oxford Delegacy in 1945, Hoggart to Hull in 1946 and E.P. Thompson to Leeds in 1948.

For E.P. Thompson, education was always against the grain of the academy. His membership of the Communist Party Historians' Group with Christopher Hill, John Saville and Eric Hobsbawm was, he said, more vital in shaping his historical approach than anything he learned at university. As was made plain in his celebrated controversy with Louis Althusser, one of his key conceptual categories was that of 'experience', which he held, offered the necessary corrective to academic systems of knowledge which, because of their class nature, regularly suppressed the experience of working people (Thompson, 1978). In his acute, but largely ignored judgement, E.P. Thompson (1968) argued that education was not always to be taken simply as a good:

For a century and more, most middle class educationalists could not distinguish the work of education from that of social control: and this entailed too often, a repression or denial of the validity of the life experience of their pupils as expressed in uncouth dialect or in traditional cultural forms. Hence education and received experience were at odds with each other. And those working men who by their own efforts broke into the educated culture found themselves at once in the same place of tension, in which education brought with it the danger of the rejection of their fellows and self-distrust. (p. 16)

Because of this, the self-educated man was expected to doubt the experience of his fellow workers and to disavow his own: 'the educated universe was so saturated with class responses that it demanded an active rejection and despoliation of the language, customs and traditions of received popular culture' (Thompson, 1968: 14).

E.P. Thompson's cultural studies project then was to retrieve radical and popular movements neglected in academic accounts and to reveal another untold history from the 'bottom up'. The published outcomes of this period were his *William Morris* (1955, 1963) and the more celebrated *The Making of the English Working Class*. Out of these works, and those of many other historians in adult education, such as J.F.C. Harrison (a contemporary in the Extra-Mural Department at Leeds) and Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College, grew the History Workshop movement, which has been responsible for fundamentally shifting the approach to social history towards the fine archival evidence of working class and labour movement activity. Thompson was, however, unsentimental about the current political situation in which he began teaching; what he called 'the old parochial popular culture' had long since crumbled and the 'more politically articulated working-class class culture which succeeded it in the industrial centres' had been waning in vitality since the latter 1940s – precisely, of course, when he began studying the movement in Yorkshire (Thompson, 1968: 16). In his concern with the disjunction between education and customary experience, Thompson, of course, coincided with Raymond Williams. But unlike Williams, Thompson had never experienced this disjunction from the inside.

The son of a railway signaller from the Welsh borders, it has become received wisdom to see the 'Border Country' as a place Williams occupied throughout his lifetime. Like Thompson, Williams both studied at Cambridge and then saw active service in the army during the war. He then became the Oxford Delegacy's staff tutor (the Oxford Delegacy was the University of Oxford's Extra-Mural Department) on the South East coast, where his courses included English classes with housewives and public expression classes with trade-unionists. It was in these classes that the elements for his book *Culture*

and *Society* took shape; in the same way, Thompson's *Making* and Hoggart's *Uses* came out of an active dialogue with adult and working-class students.

Although the three of them were critically aware of each other during this period, little actual collaboration took place. What is important was that there was what Williams might have called 'a structure of feeling' which included argument and experiment in adult education and around cultural matters which was continuously active in the seminars and journals of the movement. Williams' own short-lived journal, *Politics and Letters*, and a companion volume called the *Critic* were attempts to engage in that arena which Williams increasingly saw as the 'decisive' world for his political work:

Virtually every WEA tutor was a Socialist of one colour or another. We were all doing adult education ourselves. So we saw the journals as linked to this very hopeful formation with a national network of connection to the working-class movement. If there was a group to which *Politics and Letters* referred, it was the adult education tutors and their students. (Williams, 1989: 69)

Williams now saw adult education as a relatively autonomous political space within the labour movement where independent socialists like himself could develop an alternative cultural politics. Although E.P. Thompson remained a member of the Communist Party (CPGB), their perspectives nevertheless overlapped significantly, and indeed they came increasingly to reference each other, the key moment being Thompson's (1961) review of Williams' *Long Revolution* in *New Left Review*, which although critical of its lack of engagement, clearly held it in deep respect. For E.P. Thompson, Williams was 'our best man'.

Thus, for Williams, adult education at its best was actually instrumental in the politics of social change and not merely, as it was ironically characterised by William Cobbett in the 19th century, 'taking learning to a class seen in deficit'. During the 1930s, Williams argued, a significant change had taken place in which many intellectuals went into adult education, not so much with a missionary sense of social conscience as in an earlier period, but with the intention of helping to build a social *consciousness* to meet the crises of a modern capitalist society.

The post-Second World War period then saw a significant shift in and broadening of the material and subjects of WEA-based adult education away from its traditional centre in politics and economics towards what Williams (1989) called, 'thinking about symbolic values', or how social consciousness is made in which close reading of newspapers and advertisements became a form of political education (p. 165). In a complementary movement, E.P. Thompson's literature classes in Yorkshire were turning increasingly historical and sociological (he was appointed as Literature tutor); his focus too had shifted to the formation of social consciousness and beyond that to the effect it had on shaping social class. Thompson now turned towards a history writing which heavily referenced literary texts and popular writing in ways which were dramatically innovative. One major outcome of this experimental work was the heightening of the realm of the symbolic from its relative obscurity behind the facticity of the 'material'. Thus, both Thompson and Williams were converging on the critical conjunctural moments of the formation of class and social consciousness.

Richard Hoggart, as we have seen, was less interested in this grand political project. Instead, he focused down onto ‘popular culture’, particularly those forms already investigated by the Leavises, the popular press and advertising. This kind of enquiry had in fact been pursued in the WEA from the early 1930s by no less than the founder of the Leavisite journal, *Scrutiny*, Lionel (L.C.) Knights, as a part-time tutor in Bethnal Green and Manchester (who had been criticised ‘for not teaching literature’ by the local inspector). Knights (1933) made careful use of *Culture and Environment* by Queenie (Q.D.) Leavis and Denys Thompson and G.C. Fields’ (1932) *Prejudice and Impartiality* in his classes in Bethnal Green to analyse examples of propagandist writing current in the popular press and advertisements (Lionel Knights, interviewed by the author in 1993).

Hoggart was, however, disquieted by the patrician tone adopted by Queenie Leavis in relation to working-class readers of ‘popular’, or as she preferred to call it, ‘mass’ culture. From his own intimate experience of being raised in a working-class family, he was convinced that working people were not the kind of tabula rasa upon which the popular press merely imprinted its views, but were, on the contrary, capable of making critical and ironic readings of the material and absorbing what they needed into their own local cultures. Moreover, he insisted that, historically, there had been a strength in working-class culture which had enabled it to resist the tinsel and glitter of the sirens of capitalism, but he now felt that in the era of the new mass communications industry, that capacity was being seriously eroded.

Hoggart believed that the ‘peg on the nose’ approach of Mrs. Leavis could be corrected from the non-academic arena of serious journalism as exemplified by the essays of George Orwell. He was particularly impressed by Orwell’s essays on the postcards of Donald McGill and Boys’ Weeklies where, in a phrase of C.S. Lewis’, ‘people could bring good instincts to bad literature’. He was interested, therefore, more in the subjective and personal strengths of working-class culture rather than in the public and the political and paid little attention to working-class organisations or the realm of the political. A Marxist colleague at Hull, the art historian F.D. Klingender, complained that, in the *Uses*, Hoggart presented the working class as far too passive, and certainly socialists generally have not found in Hoggart’s (1990) work the heroic class of myth (p. 142).

The *Uses* is not a conventionally academic text, as Hoggart would have been the first to affirm, but a product of teaching adults who come with a different agenda. This was a new kind of work in which the ethnological study of a known community and theoretical considerations were juxtaposed (a form which later became quite familiar in the BCCCS). Hoggart (1990) insisted that, ‘I was recreating the working-class life I knew and that was a woman-centred life’ (p. 41). His work is much more revealing of himself than either Thompson’s or Williams’ and much more centred in the everyday life of the working class. Although the *Uses* is undoubtedly a lyrical celebration of aspects of this rather than a pure sociological study, he is not afraid to show his own doubts about the current health of that culture.

In McGuigan’s important new study of Raymond Williams (1989), he notes that Williams characterised Stuart Hall’s citing of the origin of cultural studies in books such as his (Williams’) *Culture and Society* as ‘a very academicized kind of literary or intellectual history’ (McGuigan, 2019: 146). Williams thought of cultural studies as a ‘field

of studies' (echoing George Thompson's phrase) rather than a 'discipline' which many were then beginning to call it since it had migrated from adult education practices:

At just this moment, a body of theory came through which rationalized the situation of this formation on its way to being bureaucratized and the home of specialist intellectuals . . . the revival of formalism, the simpler kinds (including Marxist kinds) of structuralism . . . tended to regard the practical encounters of people in society as having relatively little effect on the general process . . . The whole project was then radically diverted by these new kinds of idealist theory. (Williams, 1989: 157)

Thus, for Williams, what were for him the crucial determinants of his adult educational practice, the engagement of specialist knowledge with the experience and agency of his adult classes (that had also concerned EP Thompson in Yorkshire) was being decisively turned in favour of a highly academicised form of discourse to which the practical lives of students were of little interest or value. As McGuigan notes, Williams had worryingly little to do with this new formation, swept along as it was by a tsunami of newly translated theory.

However, many involved in teaching cultural studies were exhilarated by what was arriving hot foot from Paris and Frankfurt (via California in many cases) and rather roughly 'Englished' in the forest of radically new journals. It was both a joyful release from the moribund Marxism-Leninism of official communism and a heady rejoinder to British empiricist sociology and elitist English lit-crit. The remarkable sophistication of 'Theory' and the path breaking theorised empirical studies of the Birmingham Centre and others seemed to put academic cultural studies on a footing with existing disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences. For a decade or so it transformed them and seemed to promise a triumphal 'long march through the institutions' as Hall called it. But, was it losing that critical engagement with the 'dirty outside world'? Certainly, the politics of identity gained rapid prominence and, to an extent, the analysis of social class and class-conflict went into decline. But as Hilton, reviewing 50 years of Cultural Studies, argues, BCCCS projects engaged with 'community' in imaginatively different ways through gender and disabled rights in particular (Connell and Hilton, 2016). Williams may have exaggerated the problem and failed to give the successes of the new 'discipline', for example, in studies of youth cultures and resistance and symbolic analysis of the media, due weight. There was much to welcome as well as to criticise.

Popular education since the enlightenment

But was there a problem of adult or 'popular' education and the universities that needed addressing? Here, I want to show that the problems academic Cultural Studies face are equally those of the wider university, which by concentrating on the branding of academic qualifications for paying customers, are progressively losing their historic mission as centres of higher learning for the public as a whole. Historically, it is clear that political reform and popular educational movements have gone hand in hand. Indeed, much reform had risen on the back of popular movements for the 'enlightenment of the people' (Steele, 2007). It had been wrung from a largely hostile establishment that could see little reason

for their labouring ‘hands’ to improve their brains. From Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* of 1605, progressives linked social reform with the enlargement of knowledge and understanding. It was Bacon who lent the slogan ‘Knowledge is Power!’ It was not long before the Levellers movement of the English Commonwealth period was one of the first civil movements to create its own educational sphere. In his book *The Law of Freedom* (1652), the Leveller leader, Gerard Winstanley, insisted that education of the elite alone would create only a ‘class of idlers and promoters of their own privileges’:

One sort of children shall not be trained up only to book learning and no other employment, called scholars, as they are in the government of monarchy; for then through idleness and exercised wit therein they use their time to find out policies to advance themselves to be lords and masters above their labouring brethren. (Quoted in Hill, 1975: 287)

Winstanley (1609–1676) was one of the first of the literate lower orders to give expression to their own interests, politically. His powerful and lucid prose was addressed to the ordinary man and eschewed ‘the traditional parrot-like speaking’ of the universities, creating a model for successive writers and agitators. His writing and speeches graphically demonstrated the levelling influence of Baconian science. In Britain, such plebeian spaces of organisation appeared in the revolutionary period of the English Civil War of the mid-17th century (Habermas, 1989). They subsequently expanded during the cycles of English Radicalism, through Paineite republicanism in the late 18th century, to Owenite cooperation and ‘Knowledge Chartism’ in the 19th.

Similar processes were at work in Europe. However, a different tradition from British self-help utilitarianism, centred on what the French Philosophes called ‘the social individual’ and the French Revolutionary ideals of *l’homme complet*, was emerging. Condorcet’s speech to the General Assembly in 1792, which demanded the continuing education of the citizen, has a remarkably modern ring:

Thus education must be general, and include all citizens . . . it should include the whole range of human knowledge and ensure that people at every stage of their life have the facilities to preserve and extend their own knowledge. (Quoted in Jolibert, 1993)

French libertarians, like Proudhon, then developed the idea of *Education Intégrale* to encourage cooperative, autonomous morality, in opposition to arbitrary authority, which came to have considerable influence on the First Workers’ International (1864–1876). These currents in turn spawned anarchist movements of popular education, most notably the *universités populaires* of the 1890s, in France, in response to the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus affair, which then spread dramatically in a radical wave across Catholic southern Europe. In Spain, the anti-clerical ‘Rational Schools’ and *Ateneo* critically challenged the Catholic church’s hegemony in education and became vehicles for modernisation of the state. These in turn inspired the radical educationalist, Francisco Ferrer, to found his widely influential ‘Modern School’ in Barcelona – versions of which were set up as far afield as Geneva, New York and even Liverpool – and played a part in the ‘Tragic Week’ in Barcelona, for which he was executed in 1909.

In the protestant north of Europe, popular education took on different forms. The unification of Germany, fed by an often acerbic nationalism, was complemented by possibly the first genuinely proletarian sphere, concentrated in the Marxist Social Democratic Party (SPD), in the late 19th century. The German educational concept of *Bildung* entailed the broad sense of the cultivation of character or 'self-development' based on the individuality of 'the soul'. It was described by Georg Simmel (1858–1918) as 'every kind of learning, virtuosity, refinement in man', but the very nobility of this enterprise appeared to exclude the lower orders. In reaction, workers' organisations and liberal intellectuals developed independent educational societies (*Arbeiterbildungsvereine*) in the first half of the 19th century that also sought intellectual and political emancipation through access to scientific knowledge. Towards the end of the century, workers' and socialist parties in Germany attempted to create a 'pure' proletarian public sphere where popular education would serve the interests of the workers' movement 'untainted' by bourgeois ideology. This was developed by the SPD through its Marxism-centred educational programme. Although the programmes flourished for a number of years before the First World War, sympathetic middle-class intellectuals were always much in evidence (ironically, one of the SPD's most popular educator was Rudolf Steiner, who later formed his own schools based on a form of reconciliation of science with spiritualism called Anthroposophy). However, the SPD's leadership and most prominent educationalists, Rosa Luxemburg and Wilhelm Liebknecht – who also adopted Bacon's slogan of 'Knowledge is Power!' as '*Wissen ist Macht!*' – were murdered shortly after the war and the SPD was suppressed by the Nazis.

In Austria, cosmopolitan Vienna was also a creative site of popular adult education, centring on the construction of a number of *Volksheims*, or specifically adult educational centres. Here, in an ideology of 'scientific neutrality', both science and the arts were taught to a very high level. One of the most successful of these was in the working-class district of Ottäkring, and an exemplary model of scientific cooperation between intellectuals and the general public. Inclusiveness, open access to lecture rooms and libraries and free discussion with scientists, artists and writers, as well as great social and ideological diversity, characterised the *Volksheim* whose scientific laboratories were in some cases better equipped than those of the University of Vienna.

However, outside the cities, a clear exception to the urban and industrial base of much popular education with its scientific and proletarian emphases was the small farmer communities that dominated most of Europe. The needs of this otherwise alienated class were met most effectively by the Folk High Schools envisaged by the Lutheran pastor, Nicolae Grundtvig, in Denmark. This model, of a residential education for groups of small farmers, became widely influential across northern and Eastern Europe (and subsequently in India and Africa in the post-colonial period). For Grundtvig, it was the 'living word' rather than 'book learning' that mattered. Although not always transparently clear what he meant by this phrase, it was not just the sermon from the pulpit. Although he believed the animated lecture was important in broadcasting the enthusiasm of the lecturer to the students in a way no book could, he did not see this as a one-way transmission. In fact, quite the opposite, because learning was contextualised for him by interaction with others (*vekselvirkning*); learners should not sit and listen passively but actively converse, relate their experiences, express their emotions and so on – what came to be

called 'participatory education'. The kind of dialogic encounter Grundtvig had in mind was a genuine meeting of minds in a lively conversation such that those engaged would be changed by the encounter. This simple idea had, of course, terrific power and it accounted for the rapid spread of the Folk High Schools throughout Scandinavia (where they contributed strongly to the emerging social democratic ethos) and parts of central Europe.

In opposition to the Czarist Russian Empire, forms of covert nationalist education, often under the guise of Agricultural Institutes, as in Poland, or literary societies elsewhere, flourished for brief periods. The Polish wonderfully named 'Flying University' was an example of the bravery of remarkable young women, such as Jadwiga Dziubinska from Poland's small intellectual class, in creating educational classes which existed 'on the run' from the authorities. The radical approach to the 'Women's Question' in such classes, as well as their nationalist subversion, alarmed the Catholic authorities too, leading to concerted assaults on Dziubinska's village schools for girls and their eventual elimination by the Church authorities.

In the newly founded state of Czechoslovakia, in what could be an encomium for the popular education movement, the founding Czech President, T.G. Masaryk, maintained that

We in the world of learning have accustomed ourselves to recognize the existence of universal laws at work, not only in nature, but also in history and society. We eliminate every miracle; while the theologian desires miracles [. . .] Our methods are different. On the one side the idea of revelation, on the other, the custom of using experience and generalisation: there authority, here the individual, subjective understanding and conscious criticism; there tradition, the past, the ancient, if possible the oldest, here criticism of tradition, progress, the present and the future, the freeing of the modern working man; on the one hand infallibility, on the other relativity, criticism; there, exclusiveness and orthodoxy, here, tolerance; there, belief, trust, obedience, here conviction and criticism (without criticism we cannot believe). (Quoted in Reinfeld, 1991: 108)

Perhaps the most radical forms of intercultural adoption and adaptation were carried by the newly emergent international workers' movements. The ideology of internationalism was a central feature of these movements, which refused to accept that worker should fight worker in the 'national' interest. Marxism was, as we have seen, central to the German SPD's curriculum, and many European social democratic and socialist parties attempted to emulate its programmes. In Britain, it inspired the Independent Working-Class Education movement (IWCE), which stemmed from the strike of students at Ruskin College in 1909, and the Scottish Labour Colleges, charismatically led by John Maclean after the First World War. While only fitfully successful, such revolutionary activity nevertheless had the effect of galvanising the British state and the universities into putting greater resources into safer, less combative forms of popular education, such as the newly formed university extra-mural departments and WEA to stem the influence of more radical approaches (Fieldhouse, 1985). The general effect of this reformism was that by the end of the Second World War, much popular and workers' education had been absorbed into state-regulated provision (now recast as 'Adult and Continuing Education').

It was now officially held that the expansion of formal schooling at all levels – primary, secondary and then higher education – had made popular educational movements redundant in advanced democracies.

But elsewhere, a nationalist popular education was reborn in the colonised countries of Asia and Africa countries struggling to shed that unwonted heir of the European Enlightenment, imperialism. Gandhi's *nai telim* or Basic Education in India, loosely based on Gruntdvig's Folk High School model, was followed by Nyrere's *Ujaama* which combined community development and nation building strategies in Tanzania. Then in the 1960s, with the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil, Latin America became the focus of the new movement. Freire's promotion of 'conscientisation' literacy work that drew out and built on the learner's experience of oppression and critique of the 'banking model of education' of traditional pedagogy introduced a radically new model and dialogic set of relations between educator and educated. Drawing on Marx, Sartre, Dewey and the Christian radicalism of Martin Buber, Freire's immediate work in Brazil and his profound influence elsewhere in developing countries effected profound transformations in personal and community life.

Resources for a journey of hope

The repressed, of course, always returns, and the echoes of these liberation movements resonated in the First World with the return of many idealistic students from volunteering in community development programmes in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and in the emergence of the peace, women's and ecological campaigns. In the United Kingdom perhaps the finest application of Freire's (1970) work, for example, could be seen in Edinburgh's Adult Learning Project in the late 1970s (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 2011 [1989]). Williams identified these 'New Social Movements' as key sites for engagement by intellectuals. Many new campaigning organisations, like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, embedded educational elements in their formation and later in their websites and offered opportunities for informed debate between members and academic specialists. Many WEA branches took up the challenge and offered courses in cooperation with them. At the same time, the Access to Higher Education movement seemed to offer a fruitful way forward with part-time degrees, an academic credit system, advanced standing and flexible study for mature students.

While initially these movements showed great promise, educationally, in the last decade or so, under the pressure of Neo-liberal economic policies, the universities themselves have undergone deeply regressive changes. These have resulted in a general withdrawal from civic obligations, closing the majority of Adult Education Departments and Centres, closing or limiting part-time degrees and advanced standing to full-time courses, and the new funding regime of replacing the teaching-grant stream with student fees has severely restricted the numbers of working-class adult students. While the Access movement is mainly confined to the post-1992 universities, the Russell Group stolidly remains the preserve of the well-heeled. This tendency remains a challenging policy area for any incoming progressive government which, as well as reconsidering funding, may also want to consider a looser contractual agreement with staff wishing to

reengage with popular education (the philosopher Alistair McIntyre's contract at Leeds in the 1950s, for example, allowed him to teach half-time in the Extra-Mural Department).

I have tried to demonstrate here that 'popular education' has often relied on a close reflexive relationship between social movements and sympathetic intellectuals and institutions. However, these movements have often been impatient with the language and presuppositions of 'university' knowledge, as well as the occasional arrogance of those who were simply taking the clerical approach of filling empty vessels with the truth, rather than engaging in dialogue. Tawney, Williams and Thompson have all noted – perhaps with no little hyperbole – that they learned more than they knew from their students. But it is a common experience of adult educators that what they learned in the academy had to be modified and even abandoned, confronted with by the testimony of intelligent working people. That process of engagement has frequently led to new ways of conceptualising knowledge, including how the material and the symbolic aspects of social processes operate. As George Thompson insisted, approaches based on symbolic abstractions had to give ground to what was, for the working-class student, 'really useful knowledge' (to use Richard Johnson's luminous phrase). So, for example, whole new fields of study like 'Industrial Studies' developed from classes formally in Economics but, through students' insistence, drawing on Politics, Sociology and Social History. Arguably, Sociology itself grew from the same roots as when Auguste Comte recognised the significance of proletarian desire for a located knowledge in the mid-19th century and produced shorter, more accessible, volumes of his method (Steele, 2007: 133).

But the balance could also swing the other way. Without scholarly rigour and academic reasoning, popular movements might easily fall into folkish nativism or cultish irrationalism. Although the German SPD aimed at creating an entirely proletarian public sphere, it nevertheless benefitted from sympathetic academics and Marxist theory. Grundtvig warned against 'book learning' but produced dozens of eagerly-devoured volumes. The Labour Colleges and Plebs League in Britain valiantly attempted to create worker intellectuals and John Maclean in Scotland perhaps exemplified this, but even he relied on Glasgow University's catholic access practice.

When in 1873, the Scot, James Stuart, managed to persuade Cambridge University to establish an Extension scheme for working people, it was the first step in creating a formal institutional link for the academy to popular demands for higher education. It was not wholly successful (but did produce a new subject of institutional study called 'English Literature'). The response of the labour and cooperative movements was to create the Workers' Educational Movement in 1903 which in association with Oxford and Cambridge democratised the academy's offering in a network of locally controlled branches and districts and negotiated class syllabuses. This permitted the growth of 'new' subjects, especially Social History and the study of mass media and film. Without these extra-mural origins 'Cultural Studies' might well not have been embraced by the academy after World War Two.

However, once it grasped that here was a new subject of enquiry there was arguably an inevitable process of cataloguing, archiving, theorising and boundary making to create a new reified 'discipline' at a distance from the 'dirty outside world'. Much of this was entirely necessary and extremely productive and gave it academic standing, but had a vital link been lost?

Williams' 'long revolution', like Hobsbawm's 'forward march of labour', seems to have ground to a halt under four decades of neoliberalism, so new terms of reference between the academy and popular movements need to be found, comparable with those of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the age of the Internet, the vast reserves of universities in terms of knowledge, methodologies and personnel could easily be put at the disposal of popular movements if universities can be encouraged to re-recognise their civic obligations – much as Stuart did in Cambridge in 1873 and those who wrote the Oxford Report of 1908. Sadly, there is no swelling Labour Movement to organise in response to their educational demands, but there is a plethora of social movements all with educational ambitions.

At the conference to celebrate 25 years of McGuigan's pioneering work 'Cultural Populism Then and Now, The Work of Jim McGuigan' held at London's City University, on 1 December 2017 (from which the articles in this special edition of EJs have been developed), a very interesting discussion centred on the role of the Internet and social media in generating the kind of critical discussion and analysis necessary to advance political understanding and action. Here are some interesting leads:

Organisations like 'The World Transformed' organising through the Internet, involve thousands of activists in its discussions and organise educational events, or 'festivals', alongside major political conferences, such as that of the Labour Party in September 2018.

A revival of The Left Book Club, originally launched in 1936 by Victor Gollancz, to create and stimulate an activist reading public around political issues not only uses printed books but podcasts and bookshop events to present critical viewpoints and analysis.¹

Podcasts can be crowd-funded on the platform Patreon, and therefore offer a cheap alternative to mainstream media outlets, usually out of reach, through creating a more exclusive relationship between the author and their reading public, not dissimilar to conventional patronage but differ in eschewing wealthy individuals. Patreon's website offers a service for 'fans' that 'choose to go a level deeper than just following you on social media. They become paying patrons in exchange for exclusive benefits you offer' (<https://www.patreon.com/>). There has been an interesting growth in radical podcasts including Chapo Trap House; Reasons to be Cheerful; Dead Pundits Society; Reboot Republic; Jacobin Radio; The Dig (funded by Jacobin); Novara Media; The Dirtbag Left and more. While very welcome and informative, some podcasts are maybe too cool or hip for all tastes and, despite their easy familiarity with listeners, do not always resile from a *de haut en bas* perspective. Inevitably, despite the right of reply, the conventional tutor/student relationship comes to mind and it is especially hard for idealistic 'educators' to resist a message-in-the-bottle approach.

The most rewarding popular education form is, as Freire demonstrated, one based on dialogue and 'conscientisation' where, in a collective situation, students get to understand how the multiple languages of oppression function and learn confidence in their own expression. But the signs appear hopeful and indicate a healthy and creative resilience and resourcefulness in 'the commons'. It remains to be seen if these can be translated into social movements.

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Note

1. see: https://twitter.com/LeftBookClub?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Cwgr%5Eauthor.

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Biographical note

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