

REVIEW: POPULAR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Brian Simon

Jim Crowther, Ian Martin and Mae Shaw (eds), **Popular Education and Social Movements in Scotland Today**, National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, 1999, £14.95, ISBN 1862010412, pp.312.

May I start with a personal reminiscence. In 1972-73 I was invited by Mick McGahey, President of the Scottish Miners and then a fellow member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, to act as tutor to two succeeding Scottish Miners Schools, then held annually at a hotel in Perth. The participants were some 60 young members from various branches. Each school lasted over a full weekend and involved a good deal of hard work for all concerned. Mick and other executive members attended some of the sessions, one being responsible for ensuring a disciplined approach (by tutor and students). Sessions started punctually and finished on time. The whole approach was deeply serious while the dominant note was one of comradeship and solidarity.

The topic for the first of these schools was the movement for independent working class education from the 1790s, beginning with the activities of the Corresponding Societies in Sheffield and London, tracing developments through the 'Painite' activities of the 1820s to the Chartist and Owenite movements, the revival of socialism in the 1890s to the foundation of the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges early this (20th) century. At the second school a year later, however, the focus shifted to more 'statist' concerns - current developments in primary and secondary education in Scotland, particularly the then popular and widely supported move to comprehensive secondary education.

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What I found most impressive were the pedagogical techniques utilised. For the historian (myself) these were most interesting, especially the extent to which they embodied the long experience of working class self-education. In a famous passage, Francis Place describes the techniques used by the pioneers of the 1790s, whereby each participant in a discussion group was not only given the opportunity, but finally compelled to participate in the discussion and articulate his point of view. The Scottish Miners School built on this experience. During the weekend, after the presentation by the lecturer, groups of 6 or 7 participants were asked to discuss particular issues and arrive at a common set of conclusions. In addition each group member wrote a short essay presenting his standpoint. On the next day representatives of each group presented their conclusions. At another session these were discussed and all present encouraged to enter the discussion in a disciplined way. In a final session the tutor summed up, pointing to agreements and disagreements, problems requiring solution, and so on.

This pedagogical technique was clearly consciously designed not only to encourage serious thought on key issues, but also, importantly, to assist the capacity of each to formulate and articulate their standpoint through a process of intensive discussion. I gathered that these techniques owed a lot to the Moffat brothers (Abe and Alec), Scottish Miners leaders in the early post war period. They were clearly based on already existing experience in Scotland, looking back to the great days of John MacLean and the Scottish Labour College movement. The title of the book under review recalls this whole development. One of its chief arguments is that participation in social movements is itself educative. Procedures at the Scottish Miners school indicate how such an experience may transform consciousness - though there is more to that than study and discussion. The other crucial element is, of course, activity in a social setting.

The title of the book under review struck a chord in my memory. One of the most unusual and enlightening books I came across when first studying education historically was A.E. Dobbs' **Education and Social Movements, 1700-1850**. This book had actually been published as early as 1919 but had generally been forgotten by the time I started work in the late 1940s and early 50s. Its analysis of independent working class educational activities in the early 19th century through the Hampden Clubs, the Owenite and Chartist movements seemed to offer a quite new clue as to why the ruling establishment suddenly became convinced of the importance of providing some form of education for the people. Hence the belated growth of a state system of elementary education in England. Motives were, perhaps, scarcely philanthropic, as since claimed; rather self-interest now determined that

education under 'respectable' control was urgently required. 'Popular' education, fuelled by an alternative vision, might prove subversive to the state. Dobbs' pioneering book is referred to only once in this volume (p.29, by Jim Crowther), yet this book is squarely within this tradition.

In a striking introductory essay, for instance, Ian Martin stresses the importance of examining 'the changing relationship between popular education, social movements and social change' (p.2). He, and other contributors, see the present conjuncture of events in Scotland as opening quite new possibilities - a new settlement between the state and civil society involving the radical extension of democracy. Several contributors see the role of 'new' social movements (now supplanting the 'old') as potentially transformative, facilitating new participative democratic forms. Scottish devolution, it is argued, contains specific features that objectively encourage such a perspective. These include the historic strength of civil society in the Gramscian sense - the fact that throughout the nearly 300 years of the Union crucially important spheres of Scottish civic life and culture retained, even extended, their autonomy. This applies particularly to the spheres of law, education and religion, and expressed itself most forcibly recently in the successful national resistance to Thatcherite policies, reflected in the near demise of the Conservative party in the 1990s, when the governing party could claim not a single MP representing a Scottish constituency - an extraordinary situation which of course necessarily fuelled the swing to devolution.

This 'unique opportunity' presents a challenge to popular education in Scotland which can now engage in 'the unfinished business of democratic renewal' (p.23). Because of its specific context (historical, cultural, political) the Scottish case will be closely monitored elsewhere. 'Ultimately', writes Ian Martin, making the connections between social movements and social change is an educational project as well as a moral purpose - 'and it is always and inevitably a political struggle'. That is well put. It sets an agenda for the future - for what Raymond Williams called a 'journey of hope'.

There is a great deal to chew over in the main theoretical chapters of this book, grouped in section 1, perhaps particularly those by Jim Crowther ('Popular education and the struggle for democracy') and Lindsay Paterson ('Social movements and the politics of educational change'). Both, together with Ian Martin's introductory essay, present sophisticated analyses but are generally optimistic in outlook. Other chapters in this section entitled 'Theorising popular education and social movements' introduce the Latin-American experience, the gender issue ('Women, adult education and really

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useful knowledge', by Jean Barr), and, of particular interest to the writer, 'The significance of the Scottish generalist tradition', by Murdo Macdonald, which stresses the importance of George Davie's work and his path-breaking **The Democratic Intellect** (1961), still highly relevant today.

All this indicates that this book is a rich quarry for those interested in the relations between education and society, but there is more as well. Section 2, comprising five chapters, focuses on 'Historical Perspectives', including a 'critical history' of the WEA in Scotland by Robert Duncan, a piece on the Socialist Sunday School movement by David Fisher (slightly patronising, perhaps), on Muslims in Scotland and on women workers in the Dundee jute industry (Sue Mansfield). A third section, comprising eight chapters, focuses on 'Social and Cultural Action' - that is, on 'new' social movements - for instance the disability movement (Margaret Petrie and Mae Shaw), gender tactics ('Representing Women', by Alice Brown), trade union education 'in the new Scotland' ('Workers as Citizens', by Mick McGrath). 'Building a Pedagogy of Hope: the experience of the Adult Learning Project', by Vernon Galloway, is particularly relevant to this whole project. The final section, 'Struggles in Practice', comprises six chapters contributed by community activists in Glasgow and Edinburgh and others involved in anti-racist activities and local projects of various kinds.

Enough has been said to show that this book is a rich resource for all working in the field of popular education not only in Scotland but elsewhere as well. It is a timely contribution to a key issue. Scotland's special position - both historically and through the present conjuncture of events - lends an added significance to this work. It is to be hoped that this book will be widely read (and taken to heart), and that it will itself contribute to the democratic renewal of Scottish social life and culture that it so convincingly heralds.

And, as a postscript, if the Scottish trade union movement takes to heart the criticisms made by Mick McGrath, on the need to transform trade union education to produce 'workers as citizens' (in place of the current instrumentalism), it could usefully turn to the fine tradition of the Scottish Miners schools for its model. After all, potentially, the power to realise just such a transformation now exists. With nearly 700,000 members the Scottish TUC (or rather the trade unions that make it up) could become a powerful force for democratic renewal, and so social change.

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