Political Sociology of Adult Education
INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

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Political Sociology of Adult Education

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PREFACE

A SOCIOLOGY OF ADULT EDUCATION

This wide sociological overview of the challenges and prospects for adult education to survive, not necessarily as a form of practice (I do not see any danger here) but as a discipline and area of political inquiry, is a most welcome addition to the series “International Issues in Adult Education.” It is welcome for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it is sociological in approach and I have long felt that we need another book-length work in the area of sociology of adult education to build on the initial and still worthy effort, in the mid-eighties, by Peter Jarvis (1985) to open up this space of sociological inquiry. I recall having used Jarvis’ book as the main text for a course I taught in the late eighties and early nineties, titled “Sociology of Adult Education,” which had represented my baptism as a university teacher. I recall that this text focused on different conceptualizations of adult continuing education, in particular the continuum between “education from above” and “education of equals,” the functions (latent and manifest) of adult education, and its relation to social policy. I provided a complementary reading to this text. This was an exploratory paper by Carlos Alberto Torres (1987) outlining an agenda for research in policymaking in adult education. I am thrilled to see that this work constitutes the bedrock for his current manuscript.

This goes to show that the book I am prefacing has many long years behind it in terms of gradual (re)conceptualization and development of the arguments involved. Even then, Torres had been attaching great importance to the role of social movements in adult education. It is safe to declare that the role that these movements have been playing in the development and conceptualization of collective adult learning has not diminished. It has continued to grow and if anything has necessitated a more nuanced and multi-varied analysis of its effects on the adult learning firmament because of its complexity regarding the changing guises of the State, against which these movements must be viewed. What made the body of literature even richer was the gradual international recognition of the contextual differences of the various vibrant movements available, especially those referred to as subaltern Southern social movements (SSSMs), which feature prominently in this book, not least because of Carlos Torres’ rooting in his native Latin America, from whence many of the most prominent SSSMs emerged.

It was great to return to the line of inquiry adopted by Torres after all these years. He was one of my mentors in this and related areas (sociology of education and comparative/international education), having taught and co-supervised me at the University of Alberta, when he served as a Killam Fellow while I was pursuing my Master’s course in sociology of education. It is thrilling to see how the line of argument laid out in the 1987 occasional paper for the U of A’s now defunct
Centre for International Education and Development, directed by the late M. Kazim Bacchus, continued to develop. Torres took on issues related to subsequent world and regional developments, in particular the intensification of globalization and the all-pervasive neoliberal policy blueprints in mainstream adult education policymaking and provision, as well as the different challenges emerging from Latin America, Africa, India, and also Western Europe and North America.

I cannot think of anyone better to provide such a nuanced and genuinely international discussion of the complexities involved than Carlos Alberto Torres. His grounding in comparative education under Martin Carnoy at Stanford University and his far reaching international research and range of contacts in sociological and education research make him the right person for this undertaking. Torres brings both a social theory and a political economy perspective to the field. He does not eschew perhaps too hastily overlooked old theories of the State. As was his style in earlier important works on non-formal education, including his much cited 1990 book on the subject (Torres, 1990), partly a response to an earlier influential book by La Belle (1986), he continues to draw heavily on up-to-date re-conceptualizations of the State, in an age of intensified globalization, as a backdrop to adult education. Much of the groundwork for this would, I presume, have emerged from his excellent discussion on the subject with Maria del Pilar O’Cadiz and Pia Wong in a book on Paulo Freire’s school reforms in São Paulo (O’Cadiz et al, 1998). Ever the comparativist, Torres drew on excellent comparative work on popular education in Nicaragua, Cuba, Grenada, and Tanzania, with the works of Robert Arnove and Jeff Unsicker at the foreground, not to mention that of his one-time student, collaborator/co-author and now firmly established scholar, Daniel Schugurensky. But Carlos is a man who strides across different continents from which he draws constant sustenance that continues to strengthen the international reach of his sociological and comparative analysis of education. Latin America co-exists with not only Europe and North America in his analysis, but also with Southeast Asia and the Arab world. This colorful and varied background makes for an internationally rich compendium, a richness which rendered him the prime candidate to write the initial draft of UNESCO’s General Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), elements of which are woven throughout this text.

The political economic and international analysis is enriched by constant recourse to some of the finest theorists in the sociological and philosophical fields, something which certainly characterized his earlier work with Raymond A. Morrow (Morrow & Torres, 1995, 2002), but which is also strongly felt throughout this text. For Torres, theory plays an important role in educational analysis and that includes adult education analysis. In this regard, he strikes me as revitalizing an aspect of adult education research badly in need of resuscitation in an area in which there is an obsession with “practice” and an aversion to such theory – with some notable and laudable exceptions of course (e.g. Stephen Brookfield, John Holst, Sallie Westwood, Richard Edwards, John Field, Michael Welton, Andreas Frejes, and the recently deceased Paula Allman, to name but a few). Torres seems to be saying that
social theorists, and sophisticated ones at that, are a dying breed in adult education research and he makes every effort to put this right.

And yet, as with the original 1987 occasional paper and one of its offshoots, a journal article (Torres, 1991), Torres’ regard for theory does not eclipse any concern with policy research. This book provides ample evidence of this as it examines a variety of policy documents, not least those connected with the various adult education congresses from Elsinore to the more recent ones at Hamburg and Belen. These are thoroughly scrutinized for what they bring to or omit from the policy agenda.

I welcome this important addition to adult educational inquiry. I also consider this text to be an important addition to the literature in sociology of education and sociology in general. Adult education remains an important area of inquiry in sociological research and should therefore feature prominently among this larger discipline’s sub-fields.

Peter Mayo
Series Editor

REFERENCES
INTRODUCTION

“The useful task of the historian is to keep the memory green.”

John Kenneth Galbraith

Every twelve years, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) based in Hamburg is responsible for organizing the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA). In 2009, the then Director of UIL noted that:

The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) was held from 1 to 4 December 2009 in Belém, Brazil, with the participation of over 1,100 delegates, including 55 Ministers and Deputy Ministers from 144 UNESCO Member States. The Conference closed with the adoption of the Belém Framework for Action, which records the commitments of Member States and presents a strategic guide for the global development of adult literacy and adult education within the perspective of lifelong learning. Moreover, CONFINTEA VI saw the launch of the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE). (UNESCO, 2009a)

UNESCO is not the only international organization concerned with adult education, however. Similar to what happened in Hamburg in 1997, for example, when non-governmental organizations were invited as a separate category of representative bodies to CONFINTEA (Hinzen, 2007; Knoll, 2007), many organizations working on adult education met in Belém just before CONFINTEA VI at the International Civil Society Forum (FISC in Portuguese, ICSF in English). The FISC defines itself as:

A plural, non-denominational, non-governmental and non-partisan space, which is open to diverse identities and individuals, involved in practices of Youth and Adult Education, it promotes the respect of human rights, through the practice of a participatory democracy and a development model that is sustainable and preserves diversity, through egalitarian, solidarity and peaceful relationships among individuals, peoples, and different gender and ethnic groups, condemning all forms of domination and subordination of one human being to another.

The conference’s participants exchanged experiences, debated what should be achieved at CONFINTEA VI and how they could contribute to the proceedings, and deliberated what different organizations, communities, and social movements should do to compensate for the lack of state investment in adult education. They also discussed how to correct misguided actions that states undertake and worked on strategies to challenge the ways that adult education is being developed by nation-states worldwide.