

Adult education: things we can learn from Blake

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Introduction

There are two histories of adult education in the UK.

The first is the discontinuous from-below history that runs from the discussion and reading method developed in the 1790s in the London Corresponding Society, via Spencian philanthropist free-and-easy discussions between about 1810 and 1820, dissident economics teaching in the London and Manchester Mechanics' Institutes in the 1820s, the 'really useful knowledge' side of the Chartist movement starting in the late 1830s, workers' discussion clubs in the 1860s and 1870s, rank and file Marxist education initiatives in the Social Democratic Federation in the 1890s, the continued development of these initiatives after 1903 within the breakaway Socialist Labour Party and Socialist Party of Great Britain and the group round Noah Ablett in South Wales, and the formation of the Plebs League and Ruskin College strike in 1908-09, followed by the setting up of the Central Labour College and associated Bebel House women's college initiative, and the Scottish Labour College.

The second history is that of from-above interventions aimed at countering the above initiatives. This runs from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's development of his conception of 'clerisy' in the 1820s via the Society for the Diffusion of Really Useful Knowledge around 1830, the setting-up of the first Christian Socialist group in 1848 by John Ludlow, F. D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes and Edward Vansittart Neale, through the foundation by them in 1854 of the London Workingmen's College, the workingmen's club movement set up by Henry Solly in 1862, the ideas and activity of T. H. Green and his student Arnold Toynbee in the 1870s, the activities of Canon Barnett at what became Toynbee Hall, including the origin of the tutorial class concept, Bishop Gore's Christian Social Union in the 1890s, the creation in 1903 by elements within the Oxford Extension Delegacy, in conjunction with Albert Mansbridge, of the WEA, and the implementation of tutorial classes from 1908 by R. H. Tawney, William Temple and others.

An attempt will be made here to show that although William Blake (1757-1827) did not so far as is known participate directly in the from-below history described above he developed between about 1790 and 1810 a conceptual framework which people seeking to rebuild the from-below approach now should take account of. There are reasons to think that this conceptual framework is comparable in importance today to those developed by Antonio

Gramsci, especially in his 1916 article on the Popular University in Turin and his extension of this argument in the *Prison Notebooks*, and by Paulo Freire in the 1960s.

Background

The 1790s was a period of intense political and ideological activity at many levels in society, both in relation to the French revolution and to areas such as anti-slavery, women's rights, parliamentary representation, freedom of conscience, land ownership, naval mutinies, the defeat inflicted by armies of former slaves on a British invading force in Haiti, and the 1798 uprising against British rule in Ireland. Except for the period between March 1802 and May 1803, England was at war with France from 1793 to 1815.

In 1790 the Unitarian minister Richard Price preached, and then published, a sermon in which he expressed support for the French Revolution. Edmund Burke was a prominent MP whose background included support for the American Revolution and opposition to corrupt rule by Britain in India. Despite this, in 1790 Burke attacked Price in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Via his critique of Price, Burke denounced the middle class revolutionaries in France, and in particular the involvement that their actions, in his view, triggered, of people further down the social scale, presented by Burke as a feral mob. One of the most quoted sections of Burke's book is that where he describes an episode that supposedly took place on 6th October 1789, in which what Burke calls 'a band of ruffians' allegedly entered the bed chamber from which the queen of France, Marie Antoinette, had just fled. Discussing this episode, Burke famously wrote: 'I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. - But the age of chivalry is gone.'

Burke's book set off what has come to be known as 'the revolution controversy'. Among the many written interventions on either side of this controversy were those by Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft on Price's side, and that by the Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson, in his 1797 book *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine*, in support of Burke.

In parallel with the 'revolution controversy' there was a drive on what would now be called the left to investigate the history of Christianity and other religions. One strand in this ideological movement reflected ideas that had been developed in France in the lead-up to and during the Revolution. This strand includes such writings as Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, Constantin Francois De Volney's *The Ruins*, and Charles-Francois Dupuis's *Origine de tous les Cultes, ou la Religion Universelle*. At the same time there

was, in Britain at least, another strand. This included the work of James Macpherson (especially in the material that he put together and attributed to the early Celtic poet Ossian), Robert Lowth (author of *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*) and the radical folklorist Joseph Ritson. One contributor to this second strand was Thomas Gray, who in 1757 published his poem *The Bard*. Republished many times, this poem refers to the supposed slaughter of bards during Edward 1's invasion of North Wales in 1282-83. From the top of a rock in Snowdonia the last remaining bard addresses Edward's forces, prophesying in thinly veiled terms a future which includes the death of the Black Prince, the Wars of the Roses and the replacement of the Plantagenet dynasty by the Tudors, including eventually Elizabeth 1. Blake was one of several people outside the mainstream intelligentsia - another being Richard Brothers - who wrote 'prophetic' books and pamphlets in the period 1790-1815. We know, also, that Blake thought in terms of the sharpest possible ideological conflict between such Celtic bards and Druid priests, who in his day were believed by many to have presided over religious rituals involving human sacrifice.

Blake

Against this political and cultural background, from his adolescence to his death in 1827, Blake worked flat out to earn a - sometimes precarious - living as a contract engraver. In the last six years of his life, for example, he and his wife Catherine lived and carried on their printing business in a two-room first-floor flat in central London, overlooking what he once described as 'the dirty Thames'. (This was long before the embankment and a proper sewage system were built.) While maintaining his activity as a commercial engraver, Blake also produced paintings, and, with Catherine, hand-coloured illustrated and printed versions of his poetry, especially his 'prophetic books'. When these found buyers at all, they did so primarily amongst a small circle of - mostly well-heeled - patrons. In the later 1790s in particular someone like Blake, who, although not a political activist in the usual sense, had connections with several of these movements, was always at risk both from state repression and extra-judicial violence. Thus in August 1803, following a quarrel with a soldier in the garden of a rented cottage in Felpham, Sussex, where he and Catherine were living by arrangement with Blake's well-off patron William Hayley, Blake was tried, and then acquitted, on a charge of sedition. Lastly, although Blake never went north of what is now Greater London, many things he wrote show that he saw industrial machinery as an embodiment of the kind of logic developed by John Locke after the English Civil War and central to 18th century Enlightenment thinking. Blake was a fierce critic of what he saw as the limited and limiting nature of this logic.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

In 1790 Blake started to compose and illustrate the - mainly prose - document *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. (The title of this document alludes to *Heaven and Hell*, a book by the Swedish writer Emanuel Swedenborg, who spent the last years of his life in London, dying there in 1772. William and Catherine Blake had been briefly involved in a Swedenborgian church.) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is among other things a critique by Blake of the conformist turn that he thought Swedenborg had taken in his last years.

After an introductory poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* continues with a prose passage referring to Swedenborg, which says:

Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion,
Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human
existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil.
Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from
Energy.

Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

In the two sections that follow this, Blake develops these arguments further, especially with regard to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and then moves into a section titled 'Proverbs of Hell'. This section can be understood as an attempt by Blake to shock readers into questioning their commonsense assumptions, and especially the conventional morality, derived from mainstream Christian orthodoxy, which he believed underlay them.

The 'Proverbs of Hell' are followed at once by an untitled passage that reads:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or
Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the
properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations and
whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the Genius of each city and country,
placing it under its Mental Deity;

Till a System was formed, which some took advantage of, and
enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the Mental
Deities from their objects - thus began Priesthood;

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such things.

Thus men forgot that All Deities reside in the Human breast.

In this passage, Blake puts forward a sequential conception of the origin of class society, in which he assigns a central role to what would now be called

ideological hegemony.

At the first stage in this sequence a socio-economic order exists in which people have already formed themselves into 'cities [and] nations' and 'countries', and where there are, on the one hand, 'poets' and, on the other, the broad mass of people who form the collective audience for those poets. The poets, at least, possess 'senses' that, by the standards of Blake's day, are 'enlarged and numerous'. In their compositions, according to Blake, the poets in their work set up metaphorical relations between and amongst 'all sensible objects' - including both human products like 'cities and nations' and natural entities like 'woods, rivers and mountains'. In poetry, then, objects in both these categories are 'animated' - that is, treated imaginatively as if they possessed consciousness because there is a 'God' or 'Genius' inside each one. At this stage, however, both the poet and their hearers understand that these 'poetic tales' are fictions constructed by the poets themselves.

In a second stage, the poets carry this process further, especially with regard to 'each city and country', thereby developing their narratives to a point where they 'form' what would now be called a mythological 'system'.

In a third stage, 'some' people, which could mean a section of the poets themselves, elaborate this system further, reifying these imaginary intelligences as supernatural beings ('Mental Deities') that exist in their own right and can be formally 'worshipped'. Thus a situation has been brought about in which ordinary people ('the vulgar') see these figures as objectively existing powers. Although this situation is not monolithic (witness the word 'attempting'), it enables those who have engineered it to turn the ordinary people into their slaves, while at the same time constituting themselves as an organised 'priesthood' - in effect a ruling class, or at least the ideological wing of such a class.

In a fourth stage, members of the priesthood carry this process a step further, by promulgating the idea that it was these 'Gods' themselves who had brought about these changes, including the enslavement of the majority.

Lastly, this leads to a situation in which people in general cease to be aware that deities are a product of the human imagination.

Later in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake argues that:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. / For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.'

This has come to be understood as referring to individual experience,

especially as affected by psychedelic substances (witness Aldous Huxley's 1954 book *The Doors of Perception* and The Doors rock group, founded in 1965 and disbanded in 1973. However, in the statement quoted Blake himself is more likely to have been making a point about the social construction of knowledge in class society, and the need for 'the vulgar' to break out of this, regaining their capacity to see beyond the surface of their situation, and to organise themselves in such a way as to open up the future to collective from-below problem solving.

Annotations to Watson

Let us now turn to an aspect of Blake's response to the 'revolution controversy'.

In 1797, Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, published his book *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine*. This was a critique of Paine's book *The Age of Reason*, which had been published in two volumes in 1793 and 1795. In these volumes, writing from a deist standpoint, Paine attacked the Old and New Testaments, and especially the supposedly 'prophetic' elements within them, as devices used by both the Judaic and Christian priesthoods to secure ideological compliance. In 1798, with the intention of defending Paine against Watson's attacks, Blake wrote notes on his copy of Watson's book. (He eventually decided to keep these notes to himself). In one such note, almost certainly influenced by Paine's argument, he wrote:

Prophets, in the modern sense of the word, have never existed. Jonah was no prophet, in the modern sense, for his prophecy of Nineveh failed. Every honest man [sic] is a Prophet; he utters his opinion both of private & public matters. Thus: If you go on So, the result is So. He never says, such a thing shall happen, let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator.

It can be seen, then, that although Blake engraved illustrations to Gray's poems when they were republished in the 1790s, and shared Gray's view that 'the ancient poets' acted also as prophets, he separated himself decisively from the belief, as dramatised by Gray in *The Bard*, that a prophet is one who possesses supernatural insight into the future.

Preface to *Milton*

In September 1803, directly after the incident in Felpham which led to him being tried for sedition, Blake and Catherine returned to London. It was at this

stage that he began to compose and design his prophetic book titled *Milton*.

The one-page preface to *Milton* begins with a prose passage, the second paragraph of which includes the following words addressed to 'painters', 'sculptors' and 'architects':

Rouse up, O Young Men of the New Age! Set your foreheads against the ignorant hirelings! For we have hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress mental, and prolong corporeal war . . . suffer not the fashionable fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works . . .

A short poem beginning 'And Did Those Feet in ancient time' follows this prose passage. (For the sake of simplicity I will assume here that in this poem the first person speaker is Blake himself.) The poem has four stanzas. Each of the first two stanzas consists of two questions beginning with the word 'And'. This arguably gives readers the feeling of entering - or at least overhearing - a discussion that is already under way:

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

These stanzas refer to a belief held by some people in Blake's day that Joseph of Arimathea, supposed to be Jesus's uncle, came to Cornwall to buy tin that was mined there, and brought his nephew with him. (In 1773 as an apprentice, Blake did an engraving that shows Joseph of Arimathea standing 'among the rocks of Albion' - that is, England.) We shall see, however, that Blake's idea of the historical Jesus was sharply opposed to that implied in such phrases as 'the holy lamb of God' and 'the Countenance Divine'.

The questions posed in these first two stanzas of 'And did those feet . . .' can be read in several ways - for example as seeking evidence about actual events, or as rhetorical questions to which the implied answer in each case is probably 'no'. However, another - arguably more plausible - reading is that Blake here challenges readers to ask themselves, 'Does it really matter?', with the implication that the priority is to do something now, rather than seek comfort from questionable stories about the past.

In the third stanza Blake makes four demands:

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

The armaments called for are not those used in early 19th century warfare - for example cannon, grenades, muskets, pistols, cutlases or sabres - but archaic ones drawn from classical mythology (for example the reference to Cupid) and the Old Testament. Contemporary readers would have recognised the reference to the Old Testament story in which the prophet Elijah, rather than dying, is taken up into heaven in such a chariot. By this reference, then, Blake presents himself either as - or as someone who seeks to become - a prophet.

In the fourth stanza Blake gives, in the form of denials, two undertakings:

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

The sword was both a weapon used in 'ancient times' and, as we have seen from Burke's *Reflections*, a weapon carried by well-off men of Blake's day. There is an ambiguity here - as to whether the 'sword' is a metaphor for 'mental fight', or whether Blake is advocating physical force. But either way, the transition from 'I' in the first sentence to 'we' in the second emphasises that the building of a free, just and ecologically viable society ('Jerusalem') will be a collective effort.

The title page of *Milton* then ends with some words quoted from the Old Testament book of *Numbers*, where they are attributed to Moses. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites are at a low point in their journey to Canaan. Demoralisation spreads amongst them. Informers come to Moses and tell him that some young men are beginning to prophecy against his leadership. In response to these tale-bearers, Moses then says: '*Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets*'.

The Everlasting Gospel

Lastly, let us turn to a group of poems titled *The Everlasting Gospel* that Blake began to draft around 1810. Taken together these verses form a

concentrated expression of his understanding of the historical Jesus. Blake portrays Jesus here as a law-breaker, as a violent opponent of religious authority, as a fierce defender of people condemned by guardians of conventional morality, as someone who used physical force to drive the money-changers out of the temple, and, as an advocate, under certain circumstances, of armed struggle against oppression. Elsewhere in his writings, Blake also made reference to the New Testament texts where Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples: 'I did not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34) and 'Whoever does not have a sword must sell his coat and buy one' (Luke 12:49).

In the first section of *The Everlasting Gospel*, there is a passage where Blake refers to the New Testament story in which Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. In these lines, Blake equates Satan with 'the God of this world' - that is, conventional religious authority, and referring to Jesus's rejection of 'Satan's' advances, he says:

The God of this world rag'd in vain:
He [ie Jesus CW] bound old Satan in His chain,
And, bursting forth, His furious ire
Became a chariot of fire,
Throughout the land He took his course,
And trac'd diseases to their source.
He cursed the Scribe and Pharisee,
Trampling down hypocrisy.
Where'er His chariot took its way,
There Gates of Death let in the Day,
Broke down every chain and bar;
And Satan in His spiritual war
Dragg'd at His chariot-wheels: loud howl'd
The God of this world: louder roll'd
The chariot-wheels, and louder still
His voice was heard from Zion's Hill,
And in His hand the scourge shone bright;
He scourg'd the merchant Canaanite
From out the Temple of His Mind . . .

It can be seen, then, that Blake's conception of Jesus, whether historically accurate or not, was as a political agitator who openly opposed the ideology of mainstream Judaism, and of course was executed at the instigation of its priesthood for so doing. In short Blake believed the historical Jesus to have been a prophet in the sense in which he came to understand this term.

Conclusion

A wider public for Blake's works developed after 1863, when a biography, started by Alexander Gilchrist and finished after his death by Gilchrist's wife, Anne, was published. In this biography, as part of their coverage of Blake's *Milton*, the Gilchrists included the text of the verses that begin 'And did those feet . . .', thus bringing these to non-specialist attention. Then in 1916, at the instigation of the poet laureate, Robert Bridges, the upper class composer and Royal College of Music principal Hubert Parry set these verses to music. Parry originally titled this work *And did those feet in ancient time*. Bridges wanted a song that could be used by a patriotic organisation, 'Fight for Right', to counter demoralisation amongst British soldiers in Flanders and elsewhere. Parry rapidly became unhappy with this, but in the meantime the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies adopted the song as their anthem. Since then, it has become the patriotic quasi-hymn and unofficial British national anthem that we know as *Jerusalem*.

The aim here has been to find a way back to what Blake intended by these verses and the other writings cited, so as to show their possible relevance to how we could rebuild working-class collective self-education.

Based on the writings cited here, the proposed form of education would probably encourage people to: distinguish more sharply than hitherto between literal and figurative language; challenge one another's commonsense assumptions; move away from instrumentalist assumptions about mind/body interaction; become more accustomed than hitherto to think dialectically as well as logically; become better able to envisage alternatives to the assumptions promulgated by ideological gatekeepers; and consider what role ideological hegemony has played in the formation and maintenance of class societies. By these means such education would hopefully help people to: think twice about beliefs they may hold, consciously or otherwise, in a transcendent deity; see through the surface appearance of the socio-economic order to the processes at work behind it; extrapolate from such insights to their likely consequences, and explain these to others; make others more confident to do the same; come to see the socio-economic order as something which working-class people can organise themselves to reshape.

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