

Gramsci's balance sheet of IWCE

We print here an article based on a talk given by Colin Waugh at the IWCE Network meeting held at Northern College, near Barnsley, on 24 November 2012

The 1909 'strike' (actually a boycott of specific lectures) by trade union-sponsored students at Ruskin College, in Oxford but not part of the university, is, to my knowledge, unique. As I tried to show in my 2009 pamphlet *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*, these students, mainly mineworkers and railway-workers - in short, core members of the working class - took on the ruling class, in the shape of an alliance between the Oxford University Extension Delegacy and the Workers' Educational Association, over the nature of adult education. Was it to be, as these organisations hoped, a means for producing a compliant layer amongst working-class activists, and thereby for blunting the edge of class struggle? Or was it to be a means by which workers could pursue that struggle more effectively? In the lead-up to the 'strike', the students, with former students, organised the League of the 'Plebs', and began to put in place a national structure of 'labour colleges' (ie part time classes in working-class heartlands), while after it they set up the Central Labour College (in effect an institution for training tutors for those classes) and a publications structure. This alternative and oppositional system of what they called 'independent working-class education' (IWCE) grew until the mid 1920s, and elements of it survived until 1964.

However, despite the uniqueness of the Ruskin 'strike' and its aftermath, there emerged in the period between the late 1880s and late 1920s several other traditions of working-class collective self-education. In the UK, for example, at least five other traditions developed, only some of which contributed to the Plebs League.

First, there were the classes in Marxist economics conducted informally within the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), as described for example by Tommy Jackson in his autobiography *Solo Trumpet*. The initiator and main practitioner of

this approach was the bricklayer and technical education instructor Jack Fitzgerald. (When he was expelled from the SDF in 1904 Fitzgerald continued these classes within the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB). There are grounds for thinking that this expulsion took place because the group around the SDF leader, H. M. Hyndman, saw these classes as a place where discussion could take place amongst ordinary members and where, therefore, Hyndman's authority might be questioned.) Secondly, there was a tradition stemming from the Clarion movement initiated by the former factory-worker Robert Blatchford. The most influential novel of working-class life in English, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, written by the painter and decorator Robert Tressell, can be read also as a study of these first two forms of working-class self-education. Thirdly, the Socialist Labour Party group, formed in Edinburgh by, among others, the carter and refuse collector James Connolly, had a distinctive teaching and learning method which is described in Tom Bell's *Pioneering Days* and which was probably devised by the engineering worker and university lab technician George Yates. (This tradition did contribute directly to the Plebs League.) Fourthly in Glasgow there was the tradition of - originally factory gate - economics teaching initiated by the schoolteacher John MacLean, which developed into the Scottish Labour College. Fifth, among garment workers and similar trades in the East of London, the majority of whom were Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, there was a tradition of which the single most influential figure was the German anarchist print-worker and bookbinder Rudolf Rocker. Like the Plebs League, then, all these movements were initiated and/or built by people who themselves were - or had recently been - workers.

In other European countries too there emerged during this period several different forms of

independent adult education for working-class activists, though here people from other classes who had sincerely dedicated themselves to the workers' cause tended to play a more influential part. In France, for example, the *Bourses de Travail* that developed under syndicalist influence from the 1890s had a strong educational dimension which is described by their main organiser, the journalist Fernand Pelloutier in his history of that movement. In Germany, the SPD conducted a programme of activities similar to that of the Clarion movement, as well as systematic classes for union officers, and also, from 1906, the political school in which, for instance, Rosa Luxemburg gave lectures on economics. In Italy during the ten years following the execution in 1909 of the Spanish anarchist and child-educator Francisco Ferrer there existed in Turin an anarchist adult education group called the *Circolo di Studi Sociali Francisco Ferrer* (Ferrer Circle). Or again, in the aftermath of the 1905-07 revolution in Russia a group of socialist intellectuals around Aleksandr Bogdanov set up in 1909, initially in Capri, a school for exiled Russian workers, while another was started by Lenin near Paris in 1910.

By 1930, however, with certain exceptions, this powerful impulse towards class-conscious working-class collective self-education had become much weaker. In Britain most of the traditions that developed from 1890s onwards decayed after 1926. The Central Labour College, for example, closed in 1929. And in the period between 1930 and now, few if any new forms of fully independent provision have developed. In particular, during the period of militant labour struggles between about 1966 and 1985 no education movement comparable to the Plebs League grew up. There were several initiatives that might have fulfilled this role - for example the Socialist Education Centres which Ralph Miliband attempted to set up in 1965, the day-release schemes for mineworkers initiated in the early 1950s by Bert Wynne, and run eventually through the extramural departments of Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds Universities, the work of E.P. Thompson with WEA students in Yorkshire, from which *The Making of the English Working Class* in part arose, and History Workshop, founded by Raphael Samuel and others in 1966. But none of these were initiated, built or funded purely by industrial workers themselves in the way that the Plebs League had been.

If we today want a model of valid independent working-class education which will help us to rebuild this tradition, we have, therefore, to look back to that earlier period, and in particular to find out whether anyone who had been actively involved in it drew up as it was ending a critical analysis of what it had and had not achieved.

Several of those who would have been best qualified for this were unable to do so. For example, Pelloutier died of tuberculosis in 1901, and Tressell of the same illness in 1911. Connolly was executed in 1916, Luxemburg was murdered in 1919, and MacLean, broken by imprisonment, died in 1923. Bogdanov died, possibly by his own hand, in 1928, and Fitzgerald in 1929. Yates dropped out of the movement in 1904, and two key figures in the CLC, George Sims and Will Craik became involved in a corruption scandal there in the 1920s. On top of this, Noah Ablett, the person arguably most qualified to draw up such a balance sheet for the Plebs League, to my knowledge never did so, dying in 1935 of cancer compounded by alcoholism. Of course there may still be undiscovered papers, and there are some articles and responses in *Plebs Magazine*, which continued till the 1960s. There are also comments made later by prominent Communist Party members such as Tom Bell and Arthur Horner. However, none of these amount to a systematic analysis.

Nevertheless something close to a balance sheet of IWCE in its classic period does exist, within a document that is readily available and in theory well-known to many students of socialist thought. This document was written in the early 1930s by Antonio Gramsci, and now forms part of his *Prison Notebooks* (also available in David Forgacs [ed.], *A Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings 1916-1935*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1999, pp 324-343, under the title 'Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture. 1. Some preliminary reference points').

Gramsci, was well, even perhaps uniquely, qualified to draw up such an analysis. First, although not born into the working-class nor a worker in adult life, he had been a child labourer, in that at the age of eleven, because of his father's imprisonment he was taken out of school and afterwards worked for nearly three years, usually for six and a half days a week, moving ledgers about in a land registry, often going without a meal for days on end, to help support his family. Secondly he was, in his own terms, a 'traditional intellectual' - specifically someone who, in choosing to become a Socialist Party journalist, threw up the virtual certainty of a career as a professor of linguistics. Thirdly, he was also an autodidact - because, when he did eventually return to school, he had to claw his way back into study by his own efforts, such that at the age of 20 he was still at school. Fourthly, he was influenced by - or at least able to view at first hand - all the main leftwing political tendencies of the period, including petty bourgeois nationalism, reformist socialism, Second International-style Marxism, Bolshevism, syndicalism, anarchism, and

centrism (in Italian terms, Maximalism). Fifth, he had played a prominent role in big industrial struggles in the period 1919-20, including in relation to the general strike in Turin in April 1920 and the factory occupations across much of Italy in September of that year. In addition, as general secretary of the Communist Party of Italy from 1924 he had to coordinate the struggle against fascism. Sixth, he was conversant with a tradition of philosophical thought - the Italian tradition stretching back through Benedetto Croce, Antonio Labriola, Bertrando Spaventa, Giambattista Vico and Giordano Bruno - which enabled him to be extremely independent-minded and to think in a dialectical fashion. (He was influenced also in this respect by contemporary French commentators, especially Georges Sorel, Henri Bergson and Charles Peguy.) Seventh, at every stage in his political life, including during the early stages of his imprisonment, he had tried to set up and conduct forms of IWCE. Finally, his imprisonment cut him off from political activity, including from reading and writing the documents, and participating in the spoken exchanges essential to that activity, such that virtually the only course open to him was to analyse the past.

However, to recognise that key sections of the notes made by Gramsci in prison are about what in Britain was called IWCE, and to understand what those notes say, we need to put aside nearly all of the conventional views about his thinking, in particular that he originated the concept of 'hegemony', that he advocated the production of 'organic intellectuals', and that he proposed to substitute cultural permeation for class struggle.

First, on hegemony: the idea that industrial workers must lead other subject groups and classes in a broad movement aimed at socialist revolution was at least as old as the first Marxist writings by Gyorgy Plekhanov in the early 1880s. In addition, the related idea that the capitalist class rules through, amongst other things, control over the production of ideas is at least as old as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). Secondly, on 'organic intellectuals': Gramsci neither pointed to nor advocated the formation of a distinct sociological category that could be so called. Thirdly, there is no evidence that he regarded Fabian-style permeation of the ruling class, or of any other classes, by socialist ideas, habits of thinking or cultural values, as a substitute for the taking of state power by the working class.

The discussion of IWCE by Gramsci in his prison notebooks centres on his view of the Popular University in Turin.

The first popular universities were started in France in the 1890s. The impulse behind them was similar to that behind university extension and the

WEA here. That is, a section of the ruling class aimed by this means to draw to their side workers and, on the continent, peasants, who might otherwise develop as leaders of leftwing movements. They spread rapidly through France, Spain and Italy. In several places, anarchists became involved in their running. (In Italy, for instance, between 1901 and 1918 the anarchist Luigi Molinari edited the paper *Università Popolare* which coordinated the overall work of these institutions. Parts of their curricula, especially in small towns, were focused on knowledge areas like agronomy that would be of interest to peasant proprietors. They tended to be dominated by positivist approaches to knowledge. As with university extension and similar movements here, middle class people rapidly came to form a majority of their students.

Gramsci had made dismissive comments about the Popular University in Turin in several earlier writings, and had also written one longer and deeper comment in late 1916 ('The Popular University' in *A Gramsci Reader*, pp 64-67). In the note made in prison, however, he stressed that there was a genuine and powerful appetite amongst working-class and other subject class adults for what the Popular University claimed to provide. But what it actually provided did not, in his opinion, begin to meet this demand. Its curriculum was, he alleged, a mishmash of items lifted from mainstream university course content, without underlying principles or structures that would make these items of value to people who had not reached them through the usual educational route. In particular - and this is explained most clearly in his 1916 article, they asserted ideas about the world without taking the students through the processes of intellectual exchange and struggle through which those ideas had been produced. In short, unlike practice in the strongest areas of mainstream university teaching, they gave no sense of the history of these ideas. Gramsci ascribed these shortcomings to the dominance exercised over Popular University teaching by traditional intellectuals with a positivist standpoint. Further, he maintained that this dominance resulted from the fact that the best Italian thinkers of the day - those influenced by the ideas of Benedetto Croce (referred to by Gramsci as 'immanentists') - stood aloof from such popular educational initiatives. He said of the Turin Popular University that: 'One got the impression that it was very like the first contacts between English merchants and the negroes of Africa. Trashy baubles were exchanged for nuggets of gold.'

However, Gramsci then went on to discuss the characteristics that a valid Popular University would need to possess. In so doing, he set out in a few pages an entire conception of working-class and

socialist self-organisation for ideological struggle. This discussion was part of a broader reflection on the ideas of both Marx and Lenin, and in the process it implicitly addressed the thinking of many other people. It is concerned with the nature of 'philosophy' and focuses on the idea that, like the Catholic Church historically, the Communist Party in Italy faced, and would continue to face, the problem of a split developing between intellectuals and (in Church terms) 'the simple'. At the same time it reflects on Gramsci's own practical involvement in educational initiatives for working-class political activists.

I will summarise here some points that in my view are stated or assumed by Gramsci in this section of his Prison Notebooks.

First, a valid Popular University could be built only by conscious activity on the part of the working-class movement as a whole. This activity would form part of the movement's efforts in the field of ideological struggle, which in turn would need to be conducted in conjunction with political and economic struggle.

Secondly, ideological struggle includes two other types of activity - that of developing ideas, and that of disseminating those ideas to a wide public. Education is where these other two types of activity overlap, and is a necessary condition for each of them to take place.

Thirdly, those involved in educational work must organise the overlap between ideas and activity in such a way as to turn the ideas into theory and the activity into practice. They can do this by establishing within the educational activity the right kind of relation between intellectuals and all other participants.

Fourthly, two specific sets of people need to collaborate in socialist educational activity: industrial workers who are seeking to educate themselves as socialists, and socialistic traditional intellectuals.

Fifth, by engaging in reciprocal and mutual education, education circles or cells comprising people from both of these groups can start to reverse the division of labour between intellectuals and workers which is intrinsic to class society. So whereas previously you have ideas which may or may not be related to actions, and actions which may or may not be related to ideas - that is, ideas and actions related to one another only in arbitrary or contingent ways - now you would start to get ideas which arise from and feed back into activity, and activity which is prompted by and itself prompts ideas.

Sixth, this process brings into being a group which has made itself capable both of theorising (in

the sense of elaborating conceptions) and of practice (in the sense of envisaging, planning, carrying through and reviewing actions). This group (in Gramsci's words) 'elaborat[es] a form of thought superior to "common sense" and coherent on a scientific plane' (that is, develops, deepens, extends and updates socialist views of the world as developed in the past by Marx, Lenin and many others, or as Gramsci called it 'the philosophy of praxis') at the same time as (again in his words) it 'never forgets to remain in contact with "the simple" and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems [ie 'the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity' CW] which it seeks to study and to resolve' (that is, it carries out the most important work entailed in replacing a capitalist social order with a socialist one).

Seventh, through maintaining this contact, those involved in the educational activity expand their own numbers. As a group they reach out to sections of the subject population which are not part of the industrial working class - for example, sharecroppers, agricultural wage labourers, artisans, some industrial managers and some intellectuals.

Eighth, within this educational group the workers who are involved level their capacity for abstract thought up to that which, as a result of their mainstream educational formation, the traditional intellectuals already possess.

Ninth, this demands of those intellectuals a degree of self-discipline, but not a requirement either to oversimplify their input or to silence themselves, as was traditionally imposed by the Church upon its intellectuals.

Tenth, all this takes place in - or as preparation for - the type of historical situation in which the 'instrumental classes' start to act and think for themselves, casting aside their normal thinking - that part of their 'commonsense' which under normal circumstances they borrow from traditional intellectuals acting as ruling class agents, especially in the form of religious beliefs.

Eleventh, the conception of the world thus developed rejects both utopias and myths (in the sense discussed by Georges Sorel) and fosters a high level of working-class pro-activity and problem-solving capacity.

Twelfth, it must therefore be grounded in valid history, including the history of how knowledge itself is produced.

It is important to understand that many of the working-class people who Gramsci envisaged taking part in these educational groups were close to - and at risk of being drawn back into - other classes, especially peasants or artisans. At the same time, the intellectuals who he expected to participate

would often be drawn from a stratum of the intelligentsia which was close to the rural poor - in short they would be people like Gramsci himself.

Gramsci saw the creation of a valid Popular University as a method by which the working-class movement, led by its conscious Communist section, could play in relation to Italian society as a whole the role played by the Catholic Church in its healthiest periods, with the crucial difference that, although the tendency for a split to develop between the intellectuals and the simple would still exist, so too would a means for overcoming it.

These points made by Gramsci in 1932 are crucial for us now, for the following reasons. First, the raising of HE fees and withdrawal of funding for the teaching of non-STEM subjects strongly suggests that the ruling class is abandoning as no longer necessary its strategy of using adult and higher education to buy off sections of the working class. These changes are already leading to the exclusion of many working-class people from HE, both as students and as lecturers, as well as the narrowing of curricula in schools and FE colleges. Eventually this is likely to produce amongst a significant minority of working-class people a sharpened appetite for knowledge in such fields as literature, history, philosophy, and some of those concerned will also be people who are union reps or shop-stewards. The changes to mainstream education are likely, through this route, to connect themselves to the crisis in trade union education and training. The obvious symptoms of this latter crisis are the cutbacks in funding and such events as the destruction of archives at Ruskin College as management repositions it to provide social work training rather than TU education. However, we can also expect to see heightened dissatisfaction with Unionlearn.

In these circumstances it will become increasingly urgent for socialists both to defend and organise within mainstream FHE, and to rebuild the tradition of IWCE in a modern form as a dimension of trade union education and training. Neither of these things can be done in the absence of - or in isolation from - the other. The criteria for building a valid Popular University movement put forward by Gramsci in the early 1930s arguably offer the single most promising conceptual starting point for doing this.

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