Conjunctural change and adult education: the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh

Vernon Galloway, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

This paper considers the work of The Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Edinburgh during the 1980s and 1990s and how this work engaged with the political conjuncture that occurred during that period. It argues that this period was conjunctural as a series of forces and events coalesced to bring about the prospect of significant political change. This period of change presented opportunities to engage people in a programme of reflection and action which responded to the spirit of the times. Some background is given to the political context of the period focusing on the transition from the oppositional politics of the eighties to the more propositional politics of the nineties. It explains how ALP defined its political role through its democratic and curricular practices and two examples of practice from the time are given to illustrate the ways in which participants were encouraged to engage with the social and political movements that emerged. The article concludes by asking how social purpose adult education might be developed in the continuing process of democratic reform in Scotland.

A developing conjuncture

When a historical period comes to be studied, the great importance of this distinction [organic and conjunctural] becomes clear. A crisis occurs sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts form the terrain of the 'conjunctural' and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise. (Forgacs, 1988).

The Adult Learning Project has lived through some important changes in Scottish political, economic, social and cultural life, unrivalled in Scotland’s recent history (see Marr, 1992; Brown et al., 1998; Devine, 2000). In March 1979 the Scottish electorate voted too narrowly in favour of the devolution of power to Scotland in the first referendum on constitutional change, and three months later a Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher was elected to govern the United Kingdom. Four months after that, ALP came into being. ALP had been conceived in a world which relied on a broad welfarist consensus, one which had dominated British political life for the previous thirty years, but it was born into a world in which much of this would be undone within a decade.

The events of 1979 would come to dominate the life of ALP as they did the lives of all the people of Scotland throughout the next twenty years. The failure to secure a devolved assembly for Scotland in the first referendum had been caused by an amendment which required at least 40% of the Scottish electorate to vote for the assembly. Whilst a majority of voters supported the change, there were not enough to overcome the 40% hurdle. A sense of ‘...acrimony, bitterness and disillusion’ (Devine, 2000, pp.589) came to dominate
Scottish politics in the period immediately following, as people wondered how the opportunity had been lost. The divisions which had characterised the referendum campaign seemed to confirm the feeling that the Scottish people were not ready to handle their own affairs. There was however, little time to dwell on what had happened, as Thatcher's 'project of hegemonic and institutional reconstruction' (Martin, 1992) began its consensus-shattering progress through the economy, the welfare state and the institutions of British civic society. By the late 1980s, opposition to Thatcherism was widespread in Scotland. Kirkwood wrote of this period that people felt 'a sense of impotence in the face of de-industrialisation and the loss of community based on work.' and a sense of 'rage at the imposition of government policies which were felt to cut across the grain of our collectivist and egalitarian values' (Kirkwood, 1991, pp.48). Driven by monetarist principles the government refused to intervene as the manufacturing base of the Scottish economy went into sharp decline. The imposition of policies such as the Poll Tax stoked this sense of loss and rage and out of such intense feelings new political and civic alliances were beginning to build, on what Gramsci calls 'the terrain of the conjunctural' (Forgacs, 1988).

By 1989 the civic and political establishment in Scotland found itself drawn onto this terrain, as the independence of the central institutions of Scottish life came under threat from a government which sought to undermine the political role of civic bodies (Brown et al., 1999). A Constitutional Convention was established to prepare the way for a separate Scottish legislature which would place these institutions, and their role in the political life of the country, beyond the reach of Westminster. But they were not alone in organising for a new political age in Scotland. A Scottish Civic Assembly was formed to offer a rallying point for those outside the civic and political establishment, and new political alliances were formed between political parties which had previously been enemies. (Devine, 2000) As the Scottish people's political aspirations were frustrated at successive general elections at UK level, they began to turn to cultural expressions of affirmation and opposition which transcended the world of representative politics and focussed on issues of identity, creativity and gender. Through language, history, theatre, music, dance, song and literature, people generated counter-hegemonic activity which implicated them in struggles to construct new Scottish identities free of the homogenised and inferiorised images of the past (McCrone, 1992). In moderate, rational, canny Scotland these were by relative standards, revolutionary times as a new consensus emerged which demanded the re-negotiation of the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It was in the midst of this heady mix of what Bourdieu (1998), called people’s ‘legitimate rage’ at what they perceived as the alien ideology of Thatcherism, alongside the sense of legitimate hope engendered by the opportunity to build a democratic alternative in Scotland, that ALP set out to build a broad curriculum of cultural reflection and action which sought to examine and respond to the spirit of the times.

In his brief visit to ALP in the eighties Paulo Freire observed that the work of the project needed to connect its activities to wider political movements in order to broaden its political scope. The problem for the project at the time was that no such political movement existed that could ignite the political imagination of the participants. Ira Shor writes of ALP at the time:

The ALP learning programs and action outcomes were situated in the depressed economic conditions of Scotland in the 1980s. Its constituency was being marginalized and depressed by economic policy in Britain, which resulted in high unemployment, an emphasis on privatization, and a withdrawal of social services. ALP activities put some flooring under the feet of its sinking constituency. It lessened the disempowering isolation of members so that they could stabilize in a social setting, organize to meet some immediate needs, and pursue their development
even in harder times, in a mutual process with others in the same condition. Still, it was not a political movement that could work at larger social change. That would require a mass organization for transforming power in the political arena. (Shor, 1992, pp.193)

Shor sums up the political role of ALP in the 80s with some accuracy. The shock of bereavement for a way of life that had been torn away so suddenly and the apparent impotence of bodies which purported to represent them to do anything about it, left people with a palpable sense of loss. It was a time to pull together, to share grief and anger, to take stock and to start to 'learn our way out' of the mess we found ourselves in (see Finger and Asun, 2001). This was an act of faith and hope that throughout these harder times where people felt abandoned, there were better times to come, and that if they held together and tried to understand how we had got here, we could try to build something better in the future. As Shor observes, 'Critical thinking needs imagination where students and teachers practice anticipating a new social reality' (Freire and Shor, 1987, pp.185).

The anticipation of change is built-in to the ALP process at a methodological level. It constantly asks people to imagine how what they have learned changes how they see the world and how the world should be changed as a result.

The 1989 co-investigation was one of the most ambitious carried out by ALP and was another example of how the structured approach of the project was an anticipation of change. The co-investigation involved 120 participants exploring a wide range of generative themes. In a break with how co-investigations had been conducted in the past this inquiry would work with a broader canvas than just the local. Sensitive to the events that were taking shape on the national stage the project decided to focus on the national as well as the local context. Popular opposition against the poll tax was reaching its height, A Claim of Right for Scotland (Edwards, 1989) had been published and a broad cultural resistance was fermenting. It seemed that there was some light emerging at what was the anxiously awaited end of a very gloomy period and people wanted to know more about these as much as they did more local issues. Eight co-investigation groups of participants and newly engaged local people formed to look at economic, social, political and cultural life and to report back to a co-investigation meeting. (For a fuller description see Kirkwood, 1991) When the groups reported back each presented a number of learning challenges covering a range of themes including: power, control and democracy; culture and identity; history; religion; cultural expression; democratic education; women in Scotland; and land and environment. Significantly, these challenges looked to address the local, national and global contexts and indicated that the participants had lifted their gaze to a wider horizon.

The ALP curriculum

What emerged was a series of classes, groups and workshops under the banner of a programme entitled Making Sense of Scotland. This programme evolved over the following ten years involving hundreds of people in a curriculum of critical learning and action which attempted to engage them in a meaningful way with the developing conjuncture. What follow are brief descriptions of two of the learning programmes that were developed in ALP since 1990. These illustrations are used to show how the learning programmes related to the wider conjunctural context. There are many other examples that could have been used but these seem best suited to illustrate the connections. (For a fuller description see Galloway,1999)
The history workshop

Many of the adult population of Scotland were taught little of their own history at school, and have as a consequence tended to rely on mythical images of their national past which appear irrelevant to, and disconnected from, their contemporary condition. The importance of what Freire calls people’s sense of ‘historicity’ (Freire, 1970, pp.65) is crucial to understanding the approach which was adopted to the teaching of history in ALP. It was important that the history taught should be relevant to people’s present lives and designed to connect them to a history of radical democratic struggles for representation and freedom. Workshop sessions began with a section entitled ‘history today’ in which participants would be asked to select contemporary events from the past week and consider how they resonated with events of the past and how they might be recorded in subsequent history. The discussions offered a reference point for dialogue throughout the session as a way of turning onto the contemporary context. Teaching concentrated on historical accounts of ordinary people and their role in political and cultural movements that had campaigned for democratic rights in order to reinforce the idea that people can shape their own histories. Each session ended with a discussion on conservative and radical trends in contemporary Scotland and the key areas of contestation. Finally, the group would address the question ‘What do we need to do as a result of what we have learned?’ The responses to these questions led to proposals for action both personal and collective.

The action outcomes were numerous. Following a workshop unit looking at the early peoples of Scotland, a forum theatre-style drama which addressed the waves of outward and inward migration of peoples who had left or settled in Scotland, was performed by participants at an ALP Gaitherin (Scots for gathering). This fostered dialogue around the question of contested claims about Scottish identity and the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. A Women’s History Workshop was formed to study Scottish Women Past and Present and wrote a pamphlet entitled From Margaret to Mary: A Herstory Walk of the Royal Mile (Brown, 1994). Group members conducted walking tours based on the book, raising public awareness of how women had shaped life in Edinburgh. Similarly, a workshop on the history of Gorgie and Dalry (the area the project was based in at the time) resulted in a historical walking tour of the area in which participants became guides and led groups of local people and tourists round the area, visiting points of interest. These tours took on a dialogical aspect as they raised questions about current issues of local development such as new housing, protection of green space and traffic congestion. After studying working-class housing conditions in one workshop, the participants organised a demonstration against the demolition of one of the oldest tenement buildings in Edinburgh’s Old Town. Another demonstration was held outside the gates of Holyrood Palace when free entry to the grounds was stopped. A workshop which studied the Scottish justice system led to a play being written and performed by participants which dealt with corruption in the judiciary in the eighteenth century, and discussions about failures in the current legal system. These, and many more examples not mentioned here, show people acting as a direct result of the dialogical study of history and demonstrate how participants were engaged in the conjuncture of the period by asserting the need to engage a diverse range of communities in the development of a new democratic settlement in Scotland.
The democracy group

The ALP political studies programme had several incarnations of what was named the Democracy Group. The first group emerged after the 1989 co-investigation and explored ideas about new voting structures and new forms of democratic engagement. To re-enliven interest in politics locally, a plan for more participative forms of public meetings was designed.

The second phase of the Democracy Group’s life began following the re-election of the Conservatives at the UK general election in 1992. Following what was dubbed the Doomsday scenario the new democratic movements discussed earlier in this paper spontaneously emerged and offered a way for the ALP folk, along with the rest of Scotland’s people, to vent their anger and frustration in a positive outpouring of resistance. Rallies were announced, public meetings were called, organisations were formed, vigils were started, petitions were drawn up, alliances were formed and in the midst of this the Democracy Group was reformed. Following this the next period centred on action rather than reflection. Banners and flags were made, T-Shirts were printed, whistles were bought and plans were laid to send members to the many meetings that were being held. In a whirl of activity the new group started to meet weekly and bring back news of events and campaigns. Members soon started to identify gaps in their knowledge and a programme of studies in democracy was planned.

Each session began with a report from the group on meetings and news events and their implications for democracy. The input for the learning programme came from the ALP staff and invited guests who helped people consider the history of democracy and perspectives on democratic traditions. In these times of possible change it was important to look for alternative understandings of democracy to enable people to imagine other possibilities for Scotland. The result of this programme was the group’s response to the plans for a Scottish Parliament that were now under serious consideration as the next general election became the focus of everyone’s longer-term attention. A radical plan for a participative democracy was submitted which called for an extension of the process of the devolution of power down to the local area, involving a radical re-think of the role of community councils.

While the study programme was important it was the action of this period that really stands out. The Democracy Group experimented with the participative public meeting structure and used it to open up new possibilities of contestation for local people. These new public spaces helped people to engage with issues like water privatisation, the Criminal Justice Bill, and European, Scottish and local government elections. The programme of activity was not all focussed on Scotland. A programme of co-operation with an international development organisation called Scottish Education and Action for Development (SEAD) brought a series of visitors engaged in democratic struggles from the Philippines and South Africa. These contacts allowed the group to make connections with democratic movements across the globe and one of the Democracy Group members, took part in a SEAD study visit to South Africa with a group from Scotland.

Conclusion

These are only three examples of a programme that ranged over a wide group of subjects and interests. While some had more success than others, they all shared the same ambition to engage people in reflection and action which addressed the themes of the time. The political context that ALP has inhabited has been extraordinary by any standards. It set itself the task of experimenting with Freire’s ideas in the midst of one of
the most reactionary political periods in living memory and attempted to develop these ideas with a community in shock at the loss of a way of life. Because it committed itself to people during these most difficult of times, it was also with them as they emerged into a period of hope and expectation and worked with them to make a contribution to the shaping of a new vision of democracy.

A decade on from those heady days in the final years and moths of the old millennium, the need for adult education programmes which engage people in the redefinition of democracy are no less diminished. Scotland has not escaped the subtle grasp of the learning paradigm as successive administrations in the Scottish parliament have embraced the economic logic of the skills agenda. However, a small but determined lobby has taken the argument for a broader view of the potential for adult education in the process of democracy building to the heart of the political process. As Scotland prepares for what promises to be an intense debate about political independence, the need for popular engagement is crucial. This most crucial of political debates cannot be allowed to take place within the confines of the political establishment. Adult educators once again, have the opportunity to grasp a historical moment to explore innovative ways of engaging people in the debate to come.

References
Finger M and Asun J (2001) *Adult education at the crossroads: learning our way out*, Leicester, NIACE.