‘Education for democracy’, ‘Education for emancipation’

Historical narratives of the Workers’ Educational Association and the Labour colleges 1900-1920

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Abstract

This article explores the diversity of thought within the labour movement and how the history of working-class adult education reflects and represents different political aspects of the British left. It argues that the making of the modern British left is closely aligned to the history of working-class adult education. To gain insight into how this history has shaped the political left, this article will analyse the historical narratives that two twentieth century voluntary working class adult education organisations – the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) – used to support their activities in adult education. It will analyse what motivated the WEA and NCLC to take ownership of pre-existing systems and structures of adult education and adapt them to the diverse demands of the modern labour movement as it evolved from 1900 to 1920.

Key words: WEA, Labour Colleges, adult education, democracy

The diverse origins of the modern British labour movement are embedded in an intriguing history of political reform and radicalism.[1] Several different traditions have contributed to the heterogeneity of the modern left in Britain including the movement for working-class adult education. In this article I argue that this educational strand played an important role in the making of the modern British left – a role that has been oddly neglected in the historiography.[2]

A brief overview of education provision during the nineteenth century

illustrates why adult education was an important resource for working class people. Before 1870, no comprehensive national state system of education in Britain existed with government funds being, instead, allocated to voluntary schools run by religious institutions, charities and philanthropists. Consequently, much of the country did not have any form of educational provision.[3] Those schools that did exist were neither compulsory nor free, with child labour still widespread and working-class families often under financial pressure to have their children enter the workforce as early as possible. The lack of access to, and availability of, primary education meant that most of the population remained uneducated. Thus, where the authorities fell short, voluntary organisations sought to meet the demand, particularly for adult education.

To examine how the history of adult education contributed to the development of the political left, I will analyse the historical narratives that two twentieth century voluntary working class adult education organisations – the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Labour Colleges – used to support their activities. Emphasis will be placed on their motivations for educational provision, highlighting the diversity of thought within the labour movement as a whole and how the history of working class adult education reflects and represents different political aspects of the British left.

There are three reasons for focusing on the WEA and the Labour Colleges. First, both were founded at around the same time in the early twentieth century and, unlike their Victorian-era predecessors, tended to be staffed by people from working-classes backgrounds, rather than the middle or upper classes. Furthermore, although the WEA and the Labour Colleges existed to provide education to working class adults, they differed fundamentally over the definition of working class education and its purpose. The political outlook of the two organisations reflected two different but partially compatible intellectual perspectives on the British left. It is significant that the WEA has never been formally affiliated to the labour movement whereas the Labour Colleges were firmly of and for it, their respective slogans reflecting a political position, or lack of one. The WEA presented itself as 'democratic, un-sectarian and impartial' while the Labour Colleges exhorted workers to 'educate, organise, agitate'. Its central aim was to use existing systems of adult education, in the form of university extension, to disseminate higher education in the arts and humanities, turning culture and knowledge into a form of common heritage that could be easily accessed and enjoyed by working-class students. By contrast, the Labour Colleges aimed to create a new

type of education based on Marxism that would equip workers for the struggle to gain common ownership of the means of production. Finally, despite their ideological differences, each organisation endeavoured to reach working-class people through education and empower them at a cultural and political level by cultivating support for the wider labour movement, explicitly in the case of the Labour Colleges and implicitly in the case of the WEA.[4]

Unsurprisingly, the terms 'working-class' and 'labour movement' are not synonymous, as Frank Parkin's work on working-class conservatism has shown.[5] In a society dominated by traditionalism, deference, monarchism and conservatism, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, supporting the labour movement was considered politically deviant. The working class was and is diverse within itself, with huge variety in social, cultural and religious backgrounds, occupations and political outlooks, and the types of adult education that working-class people attended reflected this diversity.

Nineteenth century – adult education initiatives

Both the WEA and the Labour Colleges were heirs to a tradition of adult education initiatives originating in the nineteenth century, which greatly influenced their development and activities. The Elementary Education Act, 1870 (or 'Forster Act'), for example, was the first piece of legislation to address the fact that many working-class children did not even receive an elementary education.[6] Further legislation passed in the following years made primary education to the age of twelve compulsory. A key motive behind these changes was to train and prepare a skilled and competent industrial work force better able to contribute to the national economy in an increasingly competitive global environment.[7] Crucially, the 1870 Education Act served to fill the gaps in the provision of elementary education, establishing school boards to build and run schools in areas without any voluntary institutions. Unlike the latter, these state schools delivered non-denominational religious teaching. In the twentieth century, the 1918 and the 1944 Education Acts raised the school leaving age to fourteen, and then fifteen, respectively. The 1944 Act also made secondary school free and in 1972 it became compulsory to attend school until the age of sixteen.

As can be seen, the formation of a national state system of primary and secondary education for all was slow to develop. Working-class people, in particular, suffered from a lack of education because of their adverse social and economic circumstances. This, however, did not mean that

Socialist History 59.indd 51 10/04/2021 09:50:38

there wasn't demand, a fact reflected by the variety of voluntary organisations offering adult education. These included the Young Adult Schools, the Mechanics' Institutes, the Working Men's Colleges, the Co-operative and university extension.[8]

The Young Adult Schools were among the earliest adult education organisations to be established. Their original purpose was to disseminate religious education by teaching illiterate adults to read the Bible. The first of these schools was founded in Nottingham in 1798 to cater to female students. A second school, 'The Institution for Instructing Adult Persons to Read the Holy Scriptures', was founded in Bristol in 1812.[9] Sylvia Harrop reports that between 1812 and 1832 in 'Bristol alone, 12,445 women and 2,333 men had attended the schools'.[10] Many other young adult schools were established across England, particularly in West Yorkshire, the Midlands and the south west. As literacy rates increasingly improved, however, the adult schools responded by switching their focus to religious education. In 1899, the adult schools formerly came together under the aegis of the National Council of Adult School Unions (NASU), initially dominated by the Religious Society of Friends, with membership peaking at 113,789 in 1910.[11]

Mark Freeman identifies the adult school movement as one of the 'largest voluntary movements in the history of adult education'.[12] From 1910, however, it began to decline in popularity and membership as a result of the secularisation of adult education and the expansion of alternative leisure opportunities. Nonetheless, as Freeman argues, adult schools continued to flourish for some considerable time, being particularly sensitive to the religious outlook of their membership.[13]

The Mechanics' Institutes were another important nineteenth century adult education initiative. The first institute was founded by George Birkbeck (1776-1841) in Glasgow in 1823, and was initially conceived as an educational space for training skilled mechanics and craftsmen in matters of technology and innovation.[14] By the end of the nineteenth century, there were over '600 Institutions in England alone with a membership of over 100,000'.[15] Although the institutes certainly included skilled workers within their collective membership, as Martyn Walker's research on the Huddersfield Mechanics' Institute shows, this was not consistent across each institution.[16] Roger Fieldhouse reports that it was often the lower middle class consisting of clerks, shop men and tradesmen who dominated the membership of Mechanics' Institutes. In addition, by 1849, 'only about one-fifth of the Institutes were predominantly working class'.[17] J.F.C. Harrison also asserted that it was mainly middle class and

professional men who attended their lectures and events.[18] The original educational aims of the mechanics' institutes had therefore changed over time to suit a more middle class and professional student body.

Moreover, the institutes' governing bodies remained dominated by the propertied classes and maintained a Victorian ethos of self-improvement and material aspirations, a view supported by Wright's research on the Bradford Mechanics' Institute and in the Annual Reports of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes.[19] At their 53rd meeting (1890), Sir Joseph Whitwell Pease (1828-1903), the grandson of Edward Pease, gave an address on why workers' education was important.[20] In it, he emphasised that workers had been given an 'enormous amount of political power' and that it was vital for employers to educate workers 'in those habits, thought, life and mental discipline which made them [workers] able to sympathise with their employers in times of depression in trade'. The purpose of the Mechanics' Institutes was to bring 'all classes together … to meet for one patriotic purpose, trying to make the world better than they found it'.[21]

However, Pease's paternalist view of workers' education was out of step with the crystallising ethos of the British labour movement. Indeed, by the 1890s, such Victorian-era mentalities were being actively challenged by an upsurge in militancy and strikes among the less skilled and previously unorganised sections of the working class, who had been organising in 'new unions'. Pease's ideal may well have been of harmonious relationships, based on common goals and outlooks, to the mutual and equal benefit of all, yet this was far from the reality of industrial relations or the labour movement in late nineteenth-century Britain.

Co-operative education initiatives emerged at the same time as the Mechanics' Institutes. Conceived by Robert Owen (1781-1851), Co-operative education was deeply significant because it focused on the relationship between education, environment, character and social reform. Owen believed that education in tandem with the right environment could transform character and create a new society on the principles of co-operation and brotherhood. Through its tenets, Co-operative education, or 'Owenism', encouraged working-class people to actively engage in not only improving themselves, but to work towards raising themselves as a class, ultimately aiming to unite them as individuals with a common set of interests. This outlook was in contrast to the Mechanics' Institutes, which maintained a more utilitarian focus on the purpose of adult education. As Harrison noted 'The Owenites wanted no more tinkering with *laissez-faire* capitalism but a thorough and immediate transformation of the very roots of society'.[22] Owenism represented an ideological strand

of the labour movement that did not differentiate between working-class interests in the way that the trade union movement did. Rather, Owenism as a form of British socialism aimed to empower the working class through education and by engendering co-operation between classes.

From the 1820s to the 1840s, co-operative societies had established libraries, reading rooms and schools; Owen's approach attracted middle-class reformers but also working-class radicals like the Chartist leader William Lovett.[23] In 1829 Lovett, along with Henry Hetherington, founded the National Union of the Working Classes which became the London Working Men's Association in 1836.[24] Through education, the Association aimed to create 'a moral, reflecting, yet energetic public opinion; so as eventually to lead to a gradual improvement in the condition of the working classes, without violence or commotion'.[25] The Association also set up classes where the writings of radicals such as Thomas Paine and Owen were studied and discussed. While this may have appeared radical at the time, the emphasis on gradualism and peaceful transformation can be regarded as a forerunner of the approach to socialism adopted by the Labour Party during the twentieth century. Lovett also led educational initiatives in the Chartist movement to disseminate education designed to prepare working-class people for political action.

These initiatives show that a vibrant culture of voluntary adult radical education linked with movements for social and political reform thrived during the mid-nineteenth century. With the failure of Chartism in the late 1840s, this radical trend fell away, making space for other forms of non-political adult education. However, the legacy of this earlier period of co-operative and Chartist initiatives cemented the relationship between education and the labour movement. This relationship was based on creating, using, or transforming education to serve the social, economic, cultural and political collective interests of working-class people whatever their background.

The working men's colleges took yet another approach to workers' education. In 1854, the Christian Socialist, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), founded the London Working Men's College to give working-class students opportunities to study the arts and humanities. Education, Maurice believed, should be available to all regardless of class or wealth.[26] The impact of the working men's colleges was more ideological than practical.[27] This is especially important to acknowledge because achieving the ideals of Christian Socialism – fellowship, class unity and harmony – through education in the humanities and liberal arts proved to be the most effective means of uniting different strands of the adult

education movement from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. It also reinforced many of the principles of co-operation and Owenism: working men's colleges helped democratise higher education, a key theme of education disseminated by university extension and subsequently the WEA.

It should be noted however, that widespread illiteracy hindered the efforts of the Mechanics' Institutes and the working men's colleges, obliging them to provide elementary classes to prepare illiterate students for further education.[28] Harrop reports, for example, that 'between 46% and 63% of all Yorkshire Institutes provided elementary classes'.[29] This evidence highlights the great lack of basic education accessible to all but the wealthy and why voluntary adult education of any type was such an important resource.

University extension represented the final significant adult-education initiative established before 1900. Representing a non-radical venture in the tradition of the London Working Men's College, it aimed to democratise higher education as part of a common culture and heritage. One of its leading proponents, James Stuart, a middle-class lecturer at the University of Cambridge, recognised a great demand for adult education that existed in different communities.[30] Stuart reasoned that in order for universities to maintain their relevance to society, 'it was desirable that the country at large should become the heirs to the immense educational traditions of the two Universities [Oxford and Cambridge]'.[31] As Sheila Rowbotham identifies, educationalists like Stuart believed that ' … education was a basic democratic right which should be available to everyone'.[32] Middle-class women, in particular, sought higher education in the absence of access to universities and further education at the time.[33] In 1873, Stuart, with a group of his fellow academics, established university extension to give people of all classes wider access to higher education in the form of public programmes of lectures. Rather than remaining cloistered within the walls of Oxbridge, Stuart and his associates expanded the university's reach by travelling to different parts of the country and delivering, often very well attended, lectures on a variety of subjects, from astronomy, to philosophy.[34] By the end of the nineteenth century university extension had influenced the founding of new higher education institutions, including the Universities of Exeter, Reading and Nottingham.[35]

Between 1873 and 1886 the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, London and Victoria (a federation of colleges in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester) all provided some form of university extension teaching.[36] The subjects taught were based on the humanities and liberal arts and included philosophy, literature, history and economics, along with

sciences such as geology and astronomy. Each of these universities took a slightly different approach to educational provision, however. Cambridge, for instance, aimed to enrol those willing to commit to intensive study for up to one term. Courses were aimed at 'earnest students willing to give time to private reading and home study'.[37] Oxford by contrast, sought to attract students at a more general level, awakening an intellectual interest that would 'widen and deepen their ideas of life'.[38] University extension consisted of two components – the lecture and a voluntary class that followed the lecture. The class served those students who wished to gain an extension certificate, while furthering their understanding of the lecture topic through discussion.[39] R.D. Roberts, an administrator of university extension, reported that in Winter 1885-86 Cambridge University delivered extension courses of eleven or twelve lectures at forty-seven centres including Derby, Preston, Norwich, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Chesterfield and Sudbury, the mining villages of Skelton, Hucknall Torkard in Yorkshire and Backworth in Northumberland. He also explained that

> The centres are associated into groups of three or four, and a lecturer is appointed to each group who lives in the district for the term, [sic.] and gives a lecture a week at each of the centres under his charge.[40]

While the Co-operative Union and societies, the Gilchrist Educational Trust, the Working Men's Clubs and the Merchant Taylors all gave subsidies to university extension projects, the initiative largely relied on student fees. In practice this meant that the cost of a twelve-meeting lecture course was seventy pounds. Even if 300 students were recruited, tickets were still priced at five shillings each.[41] Funding a successful lecture series was therefore reliant on recruiting large audiences or raising attendance fees at the risk of pricing out many less well-off working-class people and making university extension affordable only to the middle class.

A recurrent criticism of university extension was that it tended to attract middle rather than working-class students.[42] This tendency invariably raised debates within the educational community over who university extension was for. Two distinct lines of thoughts emerged that made the debate a class-based one. One argued that university extension was classless and that it was a universal need.[43] The other asserted that university extension needed to be more accessible to working-class people to support them in their educational aspirations and to empower them socially, politically and economically. This view recognised and acknowledged the rising political power of the labour movement.[44] The debate

Socialist History 59.indd 56 10/04/2021 09:50:39

about the purpose of, and access to, university extension became key to future developments in how the initiative was organised.

Towards the middle and end of the nineteenth century, a powerful, politicised and economically indispensable industrial urban proletariat had started to arise. Key labour movement organisations that also emerged as a consequence of this were the Trade Union Congress (TUC), founded in 1868, and the New Unions with their mass membership during the late 1880s. In the political sphere, the (Social)-Democratic Federation was founded in 1881, the Fabian Society in 1884, the Independent Labour Party in 1893 and finally the Labour Party in 1900. However, although these bodies were certainly active and growing in influence, they remained outside the formal structures of political power, hindered, in part, by the composition of the electorate. Despite the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, most working-class people, large numbers of men and virtually all women remained disenfranchised. It was not until 1918 that the Fourth Reform Act partially rectified this great electoral imbalance.

Nonetheless, the political significance of these organisations, all of which took diverse approaches to the task of improving the social, political and economic rights of working-class people, lay in how they had come to reflect the changing understanding of workers' education with those who had taken an interest in becoming more class conscious. In the twentieth century this led to the rise of a voluntary working-class education movement with a class-conscious character that could respond to the different demands of the rising labour movement.

To summarise, the historical narrative of adult education in the nineteenth century was one of economic necessity, self-improvement and paternalism. Adult education, aside from the Co-operative, was organised *for* rather than *by* those without means or access to higher education. The organisations named were created and controlled by a combination of philanthropists, entrepreneurs, industrialists, humanitarians, Christian Socialists and middle-class academics.

In the twentieth century however, the WEA and the Labour Colleges emerged as a direct challenge to the traditions of these Victorian-era initiatives with each organisation forming a new historical narrative in support of the future of the modern labour movement in Britain. The class-based debate about who adult education was meant for shifted in favour of creating an alternative that was accessible for working-class people in the form of adult education. The founding of the WEA in 1903 was a clear representation of this shift in thought.[45]

The WEA – Education for Democracy

Albert Mansbridge (1876-1952) was a key figure in the founding of the WEA.[46] Born in Gloucester, Mansbridge came from a middling working-class background, his father having been a carpenter. He attended Battersea Grammar School but left at the age of fourteen owing to his family's limited financial resources, and became a clerical worker. Nevertheless, he continued to pursue his educational aspirations through university extension classes at King's College London, and eventually becoming qualified to teach evening classes in economics, industrial history and typing.[47] A devout Christian and a member of the Temperance Society, he also had a strong interest in Owenism and the Co-operative, and, for a time, worked as a cashier for the Co-operative Permanent Building Society. Through his educational and religious activities, he eventually became friends with Charles Gore, the Bishop of Oxford; the future Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple; and R.H. Tawney. All these personalities adhered to the idealistic philosophy of T.H. Green and were deeply interested in adult education as a way of creating a harmonious and cohesive society based on citizenship, public service and civic duty.[48]

Mansbridge, by all accounts, was no less passionate about adult education and its potential. He also recognised the need for co-ordination between the university extensionists and labour movement organisations in order to make university extension education easier for working-class adults to access and participate in. Mansbridge devised a system whereby the Co-operative, the TUC, trade unions and other working-class organisations worked in partnership with institutions, initially Oxford and Cambridge and later the newly established civic universities, to deliver higher education to working-class adults in their local communities. The system worked by way of a network of joint committees at local, regional and national level that were spread across different districts of the country.[49] By 1938 the WEA operated in eighteen districts nationwide.[50]

The 1903 joint conference of Co-operators, Trade Unionists and University Extension Authorities held at Oxford under the auspices of the newly formed WEA set the foundations for joint committees and how they were to function. According to the Constitution, WEA local joint committees were to consist of 'two representatives from the University Extension Centre [sic.], two from the Co-operative Society [sic.], and one from each Working Class Organisation [sic.] of standing in the locality, and two directly elected members'.[51] At the seminal Oxford and Working Class Conference held in 1907, Mansbridge succeeded in further uniting

university extensionists, co-operators and trade unionists in their shared mission to make higher education accessible to working class adults.[52] The Conference was attended by '430 delegates from 210 organisations including many trade councils and trade unions'.[53] Mansbridge was also successful in further cementing the principle that joint Committees must include a combination of university academics, WEA representatives and members of Local Educational Authorities (LEAs). The Oxford University joint committee included Mansbridge and J.M. McTavish, a shipwright and later the general secretary of the WEA, and 'two Labour/trade union MPs, C.W. Bowerman and David Shackleton' representing the wider labour movement.[54] The university representatives, all staunch supporters of the WEA, included J.A.R. Marriott, Alfred Zimmern, Sidney Ball, and the Master of Balliol College, A.L. Smith. Bernard Jennings suggests that Mansbridge himself may well have selected the university representatives, a testament to his influence.[55] *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, a report subsequently produced by the Committee, served as a blueprint for how all WEA classes were to be organised. Of significance was the provision that WEA branches or a 'representative body of workmen' were to have 'a controlling voice in the election of a teacher' for a tutorial class.[56] Working-class representatives and students could thus exercise considerable influence over what subjects were taught and who was delivering their classes. This characteristic of the WEA's prescribed teaching programme was consistent with its mission to promote and encourage democracy in thought and practice.

The key to the WEA's success in co-ordinating and organising tutorial classes lay in its system of direct consultation with groups of working-class students. After being recruited through local publicity, these students were then consulted on the subjects they wished to be taught. Once a course subject was identified, the local and regional WEA committees co-ordinated with the universities and organised class venues, times and tutors.[57] Suitable tutors were then identified based on their knowledge of a subject area and ability to communicate with students from working-class backgrounds.[58] This aspect of how the WEA went about organising adult education, using the pre-existing system of university extension, was a true innovation and distinguished it from all previous and contemporary adult education initiatives.

The gold standard of the WEA was the tutorial class, representing much of what the organisation had originally aspired to be. This would, ideally, consist of a group of around thirty working-class adult students who had chosen to study subjects such as literature, history, economics and philosophy under the direction of a sympathetic university tutor,

who had established a strong rapport with the group. Those enrolled on these courses could also choose from more resource-intensive subjects, such as biology, geology and musical appreciation. The two-hour class would take place weekly over three terms and on a yearly basis for up to three years provided the class requested it and funding, tutor and a venue remained available. Students ideally would produce written work – although this was something that many failed to achieve due to work and time commitments as well as a lack of resources – gain essay-writing skills and the fundamental training needed for independent academic study.

Thus, the WEA succeeded in re-shaping the pre-existing boundaries that surrounded the delivery and dissemination of adult higher education in the liberal arts and humanities to the benefit of more working-class students. However, this invariably raised the question as to what type of education should be provided. Here the WEA was firmly in support of that taught at Oxford and Cambridge. During the 1907 Oxford and Working Class Education Conference, J.M. Mactavish voiced the wishes of a significant section of the labour movement: 'I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give. I claim it as my right, wrongfully withheld'.[59] Mactavish's statement encapsulates the attitude towards educational opportunities that many working-class people, having been denied a primary and secondary education, held at that time. Here, then, in the world of voluntary working-class adult education, we see a historical narrative transformed from one based on paternalism, philanthropy and charity to self-determination, innovation and influence over aspects of the means of production of higher education – university extension – and a democratised model of access. Critically, the WEA and their partners in the labour movement did not reject what Oxbridge had to offer. This is especially apparent in the founding of the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) supported by the Iron and Steel Trade Confederation and the Union of Post Office Workers in 1919. Trade Union members that subscribed to the WETUC were able to attend WEA classes for free, reflecting the WEA's commitment to raising accessibility for trade union students.[60]

The relationship between the WEA and the labour movement goes some way in explaining why the WEA was able to promote Oxbridge as a working-class option for higher education without any ideological conflict, unlike the Labour Colleges. Mansbridge, in his writings and addresses, was assiduous in stressing the WEA's unsectarian and impartial disposition. Although it supported the labour movement indirectly through its ties to political organisations, trade unions and co-operative

societies, it did not, as an association, take a political position.[61] Education, as a far as the WEA was concerned, was a universal need and right which transcended politics. What was important was to make it accessible as a common good without forcing a political stance onto those wishing to enrol. It was up to individual students to use their intelligence and education gained from WEA classes wisely in support of democracy.

Jennings' research shows evidence of the distribution of labour movement support for the WEA in the form of affiliations. In 1913-14 'the trade union movement accounted for 953 out of 2,555 affiliations', falling considerably short of the maximum number of trade union potential affiliations in that year. Jennings adds that '388 Co-operative affiliations represented a much larger number of people and more consistent support'.[62] Other groups that affiliated to the WEA included a range of political and educational societies, but its main base consisted of 'religious groups, particularly adult schools and societies'.[63] The impartiality of the WEA and its commitment to democracy made it inclusive, rather than exclusive, of large and diverse sections of the working-class population, regardless of political outlook.

However, local WEA branches differed in their membership and political outlook depending on who the administrators and students were. For example, George Thompson, the longstanding secretary of the WEA in Yorkshire District, believed its contribution lay primarily in offering more effective support for working-class activists serving in the labour movement. Thompson included service as public representatives as well as for specifically working-class organisations, viewing the purpose of the education disseminated by the WEA as being to

> make available to the workers as citizens the kind of knowledge and understanding of the social and political order that is essential if democratic principles are to be progressively applied.[64]

Thompson, a strong and determined administrator, ensured that WEA classes in his district adhered to his ideas on the purpose of education. Education was not enough in itself but needed to be exercised through public duty and citizenship. By doing so, the greater purpose of a good education would be actualised to the benefit of society.[65] At a national level, the WEA fully supported this aim, evidenced in their pamphlet *The Adult Student as Citizen* (1938) which lists over 2,000 current and former students as being involved in some form of public service work.[66] The organisation was no less keen to have education promote citizenship and

democracy and to encourage worker-students to take part in local government in direct democratic support of their immediate communities.

Another important aspect of the WEA's courses was their implied social purpose. For many, adult education was a hobby that allowed them to meet like-minded people and expand their interests. Regular extracurricular events like tea dances and rambles were organised by local WEA branches to raise funds but also to give students the opportunity to socialise outside their classes.[67]

The evolution of working-class adult education in the early twentieth century reflected the evolution of the British labour movement as a whole. Many political activists in the movement asserted that education was key to success in the art of citizenship and democratic governance. The challenge was to first gain access to it and then to re-shape it in support of the majority of an, as yet, unrepresented working class who would eventually gain access to political power, as would happen with the extension of the franchise in 1918. Moreover, a need to extend education to potential future leaders from working-class backgrounds was also recognised as a necessity by the then current political leaders and educationalists.[68]

Here the WEA took an approach to higher education that was similar to that of the Labour Party's route to achieving political power. Each organisation aimed to adapt pre-existing structures – the universities and Parliament respectively – to directly reflect the best interests of the majority of working-class people in a way that had not been done before. What was significant about this process of adaption was the fact that academic and government structures were perceived as class neutral. How they functioned to include or exclude different people or whose interests to serve was predicated on who controlled them.

Two ideological elements of the labour movement thus emerged within the context of adult education. The first was generated by trade unionism and labour representation at government level that strove to establish an influential and large body of workers that would represent the sectional interests of fellow workers in government. From 1900, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) fulfilled this function in relation to Parliament. From 1906, as the Labour Party, it had begun broadening its agenda to accommodate the second ideological element – socialism. Socialism took the British labour movement beyond the confines of labour representation by challenging both the structures and class nature of power. Nonetheless, the Labour Party adhered to the principles of representative parliamentary democracy and the Fabian doctrine of the inevitability of gradualness in achieving its socialist agenda. The approach

taken by the Labour Party and the WEA was one of adapting the system of governance and education respectively in the interests of the majority of working-class people. It was not a case of changing what the state had to offer but of making access to it easier and more equal. As Rodney Barker observed, 'The aim was fairer shares not a new society'.[69]

The narrative that the WEA formed of adult education recognised the value of higher education as taught and disseminated by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. With higher education, they would transform the political system from within and work towards the development of a classless society based in part on Ramsay Macdonald's vision of an organic socialist state wherein all classes would appreciate each other and work towards social harmony, political consensus and economic success.[70] The WEA's success lay in how it skilfully situated itself within two intertwining contexts: the historical narrative of adult education and its significance to the political emergence of Labour politics in Britain.

The NCLC – Education for emancipation

Another interpretation of the history of working-class adult education, parallel to that of the WEA, served to support and inform a more radical element of the modern British left – the Labour College Movement.[71] In contrast to Mansbridge and his peers, those affiliated to the movement had little regard for Oxbridge as the perceived educational ideal. University education in the liberal arts and humanities was viewed as nothing more than a cultural smokescreen, an illusion that deterred the working class from their true calling – revolution and social transformation. The Labour Colleges aspired to innovate and construct a higher education system based entirely on Marxism that responded to the specific political demands of the modern industrial proletariat.

The origins of the Labour College Movement lay in the 1906 student strike at Ruskin College, an institution established just before the WEA to provide higher education on an 'impartial' basis to worker-students. Ruskin was founded in 1899 by the American Christian socialists Walter Vrooman, his wife Anne, and the historian Charles Beard. Vrooman wished to establish a working-class residential college that was based on a model of teaching derived from the ideas of the Victorian art critic and social philosopher John Ruskin.[72] Writing in the early 1860s, Ruskin had criticised the prevailing *laissez-faire* model of capitalism and had found political success in his book *Unto This Last,* later cited by many early Labour MPs as one of the major works that influenced them in their political outlooks.[73] The

purpose of Ruskin College was to 'establish a full-time residential college so that men and women could leave their jobs and devote their time entirely to study'.[74] It was supported by Keir Hardie, the TUC, the Manchester and Oxford Trades Councils as well as the University of Oxford.

The type of education offered by Ruskin College was firmly non-partisan. In 1901, H.B. Lees, the College's first General Secretary, reiterated that at Ruskin 'All the teaching is carefully impartial, and all its tutors are not socialists'.[75] The College taught subjects that included industrial and political history, English constitutional history, political economy, public speaking and citizenship.[76] It also offered correspondence courses in which 'by July 1899, 700 students were enrolled'.[77] By 1903, of a 'total of 20 students, 15 were trade unionists'.[78] In 1907, the number of students admitted was fifty-seven, forty-seven of whom were active trade unionists sponsored by their unions to attend the College.[79] The majority of those enrolled were miners from South Wales owing, partly, to the efforts of T.I. Mardy Jones, himself a former Ruskin College student (1902-1904) and later MP for Pontypridd (1922-1931). Mardy Jones campaigned enthusiastically on behalf of the College in South Wales and emphasised that the purpose of education was not self-advancement but for the collective benefit of all, something that attracted support from the local trade unions.[80] The South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) Rhondda No.1 District, for example, saw a direct political utility in higher education:

> We have to contend with the masters, who have men thoroughly versed in the laws of supply and demand, and we want to bring into our ranks young men educated in these matters at Ruskin College, able to hold their own against all comers.[81]

Much has been written on the origins of the strike and its consequences so here I will provide a brief summation.[82] In 1908, students attending Ruskin College demanded a more Marxist curriculum in subjects such as political philosophy and economics. The College authorities declined to accommodate this demand, prompting the students, mainly radical trade union representatives from the SWMF and the railway unions, to go on strike in protest over what they described as 'the private ownership of working-class education'.[83] The striking students called themselves the 'Plebs' in connection with the American socialist newspaper editor, Daniel DeLeon's historical parallel between Marxism and the plebs of ancient Rome. DeLeon had argued for the 'Plebs', or working-class populace, to take power from the Plebian leaders or tribunes, whom DeLeon compared

Socialist History 59.indd 64 10/04/2021 09:50:39

to the contemporary labour movement’s leaders who, he argued, had subverted the true interests of the working class to capitalist demands.[84] By 1908, this group, referring to themselves as the ‘Plebs’ League’, had seceded from Ruskin College and established the Central Labour College (CLC) and other Labour Colleges throughout the country. The CLC, originally based in Oxford but later moved to London, dissolved as an institution in 1929 because of a lack of resources and financial irregularities.[85] The remaining Labour Colleges existed as a federation under the co-ordination of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), founded in 1921 and dissolved in 1964. The journal *Plebs’ Magazine* served as their official news organ until 1927 when it came under the direct control of the NCLC.[86]

When compared to the WEA, the Labour Colleges were considerably less successful in terms of student numbers and appeal. By 1922-23, the WEA was operating a national total of 933 classes with 23,045 students.[87] By contrast, Harrison observed that during that same academic year the Labour Colleges ‘ran 529 classes with 11,993 students’ nationwide.[88] This shows how at this point the Labour Colleges lagged far, far behind the WEA in terms of student numbers and classes.

However, the movement’s historical influence was not the extent of the Labour Colleges’ tangible success (being limited and confined only to certain communities and regions),[89] but their significance as a radical element of the modern British left that re-imagined working-class adult education as a tool for its political aims. The Labour Colleges aimed to establish a system of adult education that was tailored specifically for the industrial proletariat by their compatriots and peers. The Plebs coined the phrase ‘Independent Working Class Education’ (IWCE) which encapsulated the ethos and principles of the Labour Colleges.[90] Independence of thought based on Marxist ideas were central to their *raison d’être*. This was encapsulated in their slogan ‘Educate, organise, agitate’ that emphasised their radical activism in opposition to the WEA’s unwieldy, but earnest, ‘impartial, unsectarian, democratic’. The Plebs argued that:

> The mission of the workers cannot be committed for achievement to those above them in economic position: *it must be self-accomplished* [sic.]. From every point of view, in every part of the field industrial, political or educational, the workers must act independently.[91]

Further, the CLC’s stated purpose was to ‘train men and women for the industrial, political, and social work of the organised labour movement, under the supreme control of the Labour organisations in the United Kingdom’.[92]

Throughout the inter-war period, the leaders of the WEA and the Labour Colleges engaged in a series of heated debates regarding the efficacy and value of working class adult education.[93] Educationalists in the WEA argued that impartiality was a central principle of higher education: students should be taught to think independently and autonomously by engaging in discussion of a topic from a variety of different perspectives. For the Labour Colleges this way of teaching made little sense. All education in their view was political and therefore needed to be delivered in an overtly political framework. Their own educationalists, in turn, were criticised for their dogmatic approach to teaching that elevated the significance of Marxism to politics, the economy and society to the exclusion of all other views.[94]

The Labour Colleges, in addition to rejecting all forms of higher education provided by, and in association with, the established universities, also refused funding from all non-working-class sources. State funding, in any form, was viewed as politically tainted and compromised the integrity of their mission to revolutionise the educational system to properly reflect working-class interests and culture. The only acceptable means of financial support was from bona fide working-class sources such as the trade unions and co-operatives. In this respect, as well as in their Marxist-based curriculum, the Labour Colleges further distinguished themselves from the WEA, which accepted LEA funding, as an alternative and radical voluntary working-class adult education organisation. This would come to be their unique selling point that appealed to the more radical element of the labour movement. In 1909, for example, 'the delegates to the Annual General Meeting of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants decided by 44 votes for and 5 votes against to transfer all support from Ruskin College to the CLC'.[95] Unsurprisingly, such stringent principles on acceptable funding limited resources and meant that the Labour Colleges always struggled to organise and deliver classes.

As discussed, the educational leadership of the WEA and the Labour Colleges approached the issue of the purpose and content of education from very different perspectives. However, worker-students, unlike the leadership of the WEA and Labour Colleges, tended not to regard these two differing types of education as mutually exclusive and often attended classes run by both organisations. The trade union leader, Jack Jones, for instance, observed that the only notable difference between classes run by the WEA and the Labour Colleges was that the WEA 'had more university and professional people as tutors. For the rest of it they were almost the same'. He also noted that the WEA's approach and curriculum was

much broader than the Labour Colleges. However, for those not interested in music, history and art, the Labour Colleges offered education on 'industrial, law, the structure of trade unionism and what socialism meant, international affairs, international labour politics, international economic matters'.[96] For Jones and those worker-students like him, these were important options to have. The existence of a distinct choice within workers' education, even if both options were ideologically at odds with each other, enabled students who availed themselves of it to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the labour movement, democracy, socialism, Marxism and knowledge for its own sake. As the *1919 Report on Reconstruction* stated with regard to adult education, it was not that there was 'too much teaching which is partial or one-sided in character, but that there is too little education of any kind'.[97] Worker-students took advantage of what was available and independently reached their own conclusions.

Here, then, was another historical narrative used by the left of the British labour movement to radically reconfigure the world of working-class adult education. The Labour Colleges and their proponents sought to reframe the WEA's narrative of the history of working-class adult education for parliamentary and representative democracy and transform it to reflect their vision of British Marxism and an emancipated industrial proletariat. What is perhaps most significant and intriguing about the Labour Colleges, and their drive to create IWCE, is that it represented an original, organic and fundamentally British element of the radical left. Significantly, the Plebs, the CLC and the Labour Colleges had succeeded in establishing themselves and their own distinctive Marxist curriculum before the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920. Their educational salience lay in an approach to teaching predicated on a uniquely British interpretation of Marxism, rooted in the specific demands of Britain's industrial proletariat, without reference to external 'authorities'. Stuart Macintyre and Richard Lewis have skilfully drawn attention to how and why particular industrial communities in South Wales and Lanarkshire succeeded in incorporating Marxist-based education into adult education enterprises.[98] The key to success in this endeavour was to shape education around the immediate political, economic and social interests and needs of working class people, making Marxism relevant and applicable to the locality, region and, most importantly, one's immediate community. Marxism had to be fashioned for a local context for it to be accepted as a realistic option to other less radical approaches on the left such as gradualism. In the IWCE case studies centred on the 'little Moscows' of South Wales and Lanarkshire;

for example, mining communities invested in and attended courses offered by Labour Colleges because they responded to and reflected the political profile of the students attending.[99]

The term 'little Moscow' is also briefly worth unpacking, as it may give the impression that these communities had simply embraced Bolshevik interpretations of Marxism. In reality, the politics of these communities were radical but not necessarily revolutionary.

Stuart Macintyre shows that the Plebs were active in these communities and observes that the 'regional movements for independent working-class education prospered in the pre-war years'.[100] Members of the Plebs founded branches of the League and supported local Labour Colleges and classes. Macintyre further notes that classes run by the Labour Colleges 'merged with the existing efforts of Marxist groups and, where possible, won the support of local trade union branches'.[101] Between 1914 and 1917 William Craik reported that there were '"at least a hundred" classes operating in England and Wales' with forty of these having taken place in South Wales.[102] In this way, the Plebs succeeded in embedding themselves in communities that were radical in their political outlook.

In the absence of competition from other politically radical organisations, the Labour Colleges flourished throughout the Edwardian era and during the First World War. This changed in 1920 with the founding of the CPGB, which sought to monopolise Marxist thought in Britain by correcting 'defective (non-Leninist) understandings of Marxism'.[103] It subsequently proceeded to undermine the efforts and achievements of the Plebs' League and Labour Colleges by attempting to make them into 'adjuncts of the Party activity'.[104] The ensuing conflict that erupted between the League and the CPGB was further complicated by the fact that many of the Plebs were also members of the CPGB and vice versa. Between 1922 and 1924, prominent personalities such as Frank and Winifred Horrabin, Ellen Wilkinson and Raymond Postgate, all staunch members of the Plebs, left the CPGB because of their differences with the Party on several issues, including their conception of Marxism and Marxist education.[105] The most significant point of disagreement was over the CPGB's adherence to the Bolshevik idea that working class education could 'only achieve its objective under the leadership of the Party'. By contrast, the Plebs were firmly of the opinion that what was most important was not the Party but an educational organisation 'supported by all workers, industrial and political organisations and uncommitted to any sectional policy'.[106] The final split between the CPGB and Plebs' League occurred in 1923. It is significant, as Macintyre notes, that the CPGB's strategy weakened the League's

Socialist History 59.indd 68 10/04/2021 09:50:39

educational influence, stripping it of a valuable network that included many potential activists interested in Marxism.[107]

This brings the discussion back to how the Plebs interpreted Marxism from a very British perspective and used education to enact change. For the Plebs, the purpose of IWCE was to instil British society, especially the industrial workforce, with a strong sense of class consciousness. By disseminating this concept through education, a British understanding of Marxism would eventually permeate society and bring about a transformation of the British political system from below.

The Plebs and the Labour Colleges, established almost a decade before the Russian Revolution, demonstrate that a home-grown British Marxism had been taking root before being displaced by the Leninist-Bolshevik version. Why was this important? Why is this relevant to the historiography of working-class adult education and the radical left in Britain? The answer lies in democracy. Political and social space, based on democratic values, already existed within the context of British working-class adult education, allowing for voluntary organisations like the Labour Colleges and WEA to emerge in support of a generation of future labour-movement leaders with diverse political creeds.

The key difference between the two organisations was the WEA's 'impartial' approach that sought to disseminate higher education as a universal good. A potential and indirect benefit was that the worker-students would become politically active in support of the labour movement. Conversely, the Labour Colleges believed that the purpose of education was to nurture and directly support potential militant leaders for class struggle.

Both organisations co-existed despite their differences and engaged in vigorous debate on the efficacy and purpose of adult education for working-class British people. It was this plurality of views which reflected and responded to the diversity of political perspectives within the labour movement.

Conclusion

This article set out to analyse why and how narratives of the history of working-class adult education were used by the WEA and the Labour Colleges to support and empower a diverse British working-class body. It has analysed what motivated nineteenth-century organisations to disseminate working-class adult education. It has also shown how the WEA and the Labour Colleges re-interpreted aspects of the ownership of the means

of production of education and changed the world of adult education to reflect and respond to the diverse educational demands of working-class adult students. It has also explored the, still on-going, debate surrounding the purpose of higher education in terms of widening participation, citizenship and political empowerment.

The history of working-class adult education from the perspective of the WEA and Labour Colleges, emphasises the relevance and significance of democratic space to debate issues and challenges around its provision and political relevance to those on the moderate and radical left. Ultimately, the historiography of working-class adult education and its contribution to different elements of the modern British left reveal how a robust democracy was integral to supporting and nurturing a diverse culture of working-class learning and political empowerment from 1900 to 1920.

Notes

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3. W.P McCann, 'Elementary Education in England and Wales on the Eve of the 1870 Education Act', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 2,1 (1969): 20-29; Stuart J. Maclure (ed.), *Educational Documents England and Wales: 1816 to the Present Day*, 5th Ed., London, 1986.
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Socialist History 59.indd 70 10/04/2021 09:50:39

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