Adult Education in the Danish Modernization Process

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Danish adult education has an old and rich tradition, and has also been fundamentally reconstructed and differentiated during second half of the 20th century. The aim of this article is to provide an input for a discussion about the situation of a Danish (Nordic) model of adult education in the context of European policy as well as globalization. The article will seek to conceptualize the tension between adult education which is founded in and aiming at local participants and contexts and a globalization process which redefines the cultural environment and presents a new and challenging agenda for adult learning. I will apply a rather general framework of historical analysis of adult education which is derived from and related to European modernization (Salling Olesen 2009) on the history of Danish adult education and the possible contemporary impacts of this history (Salling Olesen 1985;1989). It looks at the societal nature of adult learning and hence the societal functions of adult education, and emphasizes the historical dimension in the sense of linking adult education to local socioeconomic, political, and cultural dynamics. Having done that I will return to the question about how we can see adult education in the context of globalization.

Institutional education increasingly appears to be the normal context of learning in modern life. Adult education has been seen as just the logical complement to this history of institutionalization - changing its task to align with the historical development of institutional organization of learning in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Much research as well as policy interest has been concerned with this compensating function, under the assumption that (formal) education is a common good or a necessity and this is increasingly also the case for adult learning. This model of thinking is justified to some extent by the speed of the growth in institutional schooling, but it also reproduces a tendency to see the education system in isolation from other learning and learning contexts. In this article I will, rather than focusing on the relation to the institutional education system alone, instead see adult learning in relation to societal needs and functions that may be fulfilled in different forms of informal learning or in formal education depending on specific historical circumstances. I will look at the Danish example with attention to the relation between homogenizing forces of European history and the specific local history – and will seek to point out the theoretical and epistemological perspectives in this tension. Historically adult education has primarily been organized by social and cultural movements or local communities, partly providing an alternative to the institutional schooling, and with a particular cultural or political overall agenda (political, religious, cultural), and this is still the situation in many countries within Europe. The boundaries between educational institutions and organizations whose main purpose were something different have often been quite blurred. This is especially clear for work related learning but also here a lot of work related learning is increasingly being organized in the form of formal training and full educational programs in addition to existing education which have been the basis of professions and trades. Work related training is probably the fastest growing area of adult education and training, but is very difficult to map correctly - and also less easy to influence, and may for this reason often downplayed or neglected in analysis of adult education and policy agendas.

*Adult Education and Modernization*

Much of the recent discussion in adult education appears as a clash between educational cultures. On the one hand, there is a humanistic focus on personal and political self-articulation, which seems to be inherited from the traditional functions of community learning and liberal adult education. On the other hand, there is the instrumental perspective on lifelong learning for work and economic competitiveness, theoretically underpinned by human capital theory and similar frameworks of understanding. These ideological struggles refer to different historical experiences and are triggered by a major transformation in the contemporary importance of adult learning.

The theoretical notion of modernization seems to be a productive backbone in understanding the multiple institutional realities, conceptual meanings, and historical changes of adult education and learning in the context of societal functions of adult learning. Modernization, here, refers to the economic, social, and cultural changes which have taken place in the last 300–500 years, comprising the inclusion of feudal dynasties and independent city republics in the melting pot of European nation-state building, as well as the imperial inclusion of cultures and countries in the Third and Fourth World that had been living separate from dynamic centers right until the great discoveries or later.

Capitalist economy has been the main motor in this modernization process, where traditional, self-sustaining local communities were included in larger societies, affecting all aspects of political, social, and cultural relations. The development of institutional (formal) education, replacing informal education and learning, is just one of these effects.

Adult learning develops complementarily to this broader history of modernization, enabling individuals to deal with new societal realities. The very notions of adulthood and subjectivity result from this history in a complex process constituting the individual as a reflective and conscious agent in society, replacing the definition of adulthood by ceremonial inauguration.

There is a built-in risk in using the theoretical perspective of modernization framework. Seen from the dominant center of a global, modernized world, it may seem that adult education and learning is right at hand to enable modernization, harmonize the levels of learning between generations, and live up to the accelerating needs for individuals to change. In other words a certain functionalism may produce a local truth of an occidental modernization, where the efficiency and speed of knowledge transmission seems to be secured by institutional education. In the second place such an understanding may be projected into a global convergence. In order to avoid such a narrow functionalist perspective we must study adult learning and education history with the perspective of discovering the local dynamics and the multiple and infinite nature of the modernization process. I will do this by means of examples from the history Danish adult education.

We can distinguish three main types of adult education that have developed as educational traditions in their own right, related to particular areas of learning:

* Basic literacy education, such as reading and writing, numeracy and lately increasingly computer skills and foreign language
* Community and popular education, learning within, from and for a community or a social movement
* Education and training for work, such as continuing education, retraining, upskilling.

This is not an exhaustive list. But each of these three types of adult education can be found in all modern societies – but in very different forms and at different stages in modernizations processes. I will use them to illustrate the link between adult education and modernization – and as an exemplary case the specificity of their development in the Danish case.

*Literacy Education: Enabling Modern Societies*

The original and most widespread understanding of literacy is related to reading and writing. Prototype literacy education has been engaged in making developing societies literate or in compensating for lack of adequate schooling in modern societies. If we look at it from a societal perspective, literacy is a precondition for citizenship and socioeconomic participation. Across Europe, literacy has been closely related to the building of nation states. The development of secular education activities and the emergence of literature in national languages were instrumental in the building of nation states, and thereby – in Europe – the modernization of societies in the 18th and 19th century. Today, literacy has become a political issue in the multi-cultural societies emerging in modern Europe, and in some cases, instrumental for minorities to establish home rule or new states. The question about language remains a field of tension in cases where the nation state is not based in language unity in several cases even today. The Belgian case is well known – Catalunyan, Basque, Galician and Andalusian remain separate, functioning languages which at least in Catalunya are closely connected with the claim for splitting the state of Spain into its cultural/linguistic regions. In Norway a separate written language was developed on the basis of dialects from the regions far away from colonial center Oslo so that Norway now has two clearly different languages, historically one local/peripheral and one postcolonial (closer to Danish).

In Denmark language learning developed in a compromise between religion, enlightenment intentions and the need for child labor in agriculture. Denmark was a rural country, controlled by a small lower nobility and royal court detached from the rural population (actually mostly speaking French), and the kings were part of the shifting German feudal system, most of them also ruling some northern regions of later Germany. There was no bourgeois revolution in Denmark but an agricultural reform in the second half of 18. Century, a modernization of agriculture from below, for reasons of economic efficiency facilitated by an alliance of progressive landowners and the royal court, which led to a structure of many small family owned agricultural units and a general modernization of agriculture. This had also implications for education and literacy.

A general school legislation was passed in 1814 which also included training in Danish language but already the Protestant intention of making the bible readable in local language influenced different preceding forms of schooling which included reading Danish. Basic schooling remained very limited in rural areas. An elite high school system, called Latin Schools, represented the highest level of general education.

But in the time of European political liberation, with revolutions in Germany in the middle of the 19th century a romantic popular culture developed and spread among the Self-owning peasants. In opposition to the urban Latin and Central European culture it took up a Nordic shared mythology and emphasized the connection between language, locality (soil) and culture, not unlike later Nazi ideology, but with a clear ideology of freedom and self reliance of the peasant class. The material basis of this was obviously the agricultural reforms of the previous century, and became important for the first democratic reform movement in Denmark which led to a constitution in 1849.

Actually, when an urban elite first emerged in Copenhagen it also turned out nationalistic-romantic. At the time the kingdom still united the present Denmark and the duchies of the present Northern Germany – South Sweden and Norway had been lost earlier. The romantic nationalism was a good deal of the reason for the wars in the second half of 19th century with the new greater power Prussia – and the Danish national state thereby got rid of the partly German-speaking parts of the kingdom in the second half of 19th century. Whereas other European nation states were based on linguistic unity the Danish state finally became a nation state by splitting off, paving the way for the myth of a thousand years of unbroken identity between people, monarchy and language that nowadays rampant Danish politics. With a relatively good school and later mass media even dialects and sociolects have become eroded, the literacy question sunk under the radar until the last 2-3 decades of 20th century when it popped up in several versions: First because homogenous population was enriched with work immigrants, but also as a matter of functional literacy – the competence to actually read and write in everyday life. Today’s industrial worker must be literate in order to fulfill simple work tasks because logistics and communication are built into every single task on the shop floor, and the trade unions of unskilled workers were first to point out the de facto literacy failure. The new concern about cultural techniques based in economic rationales hits an egalitarian society from behind. The surprising results of IALS, PISA and PIAAC studies question the assumed efficacy of formal schooling.

Literacy as a cultural technique is necessary and empowering for the individual, but when we see it as an essential aspect of cultural integration it also entails submission. In the cases of colonial modernization we can see derivates of the great colonial empires, some united and enabled as modern societies by the colonial language, and all are to some extent influenced and shaped by colonial rule. A parallel but also different phenomenon can be observed in relation to the present Chinese development. A strong and well established Chinese culture adopts economic and social models of occidental culture as an accompanying aspect of global capitalism, but actually had its own literacy issue in which the command of mandarin was a tool for maintaining a centralized power – more similar to the Roman church and Latin – and the construction of a simplified written language helped to transform imperial China into the Peoples Republic China. Brazilian Paolo Freire answered the colonial contradiction with a notion of political literacy he called conscientization, or learning to reflect the social reality and power relations involved in it. You may see Freire’s ideas as congenial with mainstream modernist pedagogy, related to the political learning process of those who are the victims and beneficiaries of a modernization coming to them from outside. You might criticize the notion of “conscientization” as an arrogant “besserwissen”. This is probably too simplistic – romanticizing the indigenous culture – but it raises the question about the relation between a “conscientization” rooted in Portuguese and all the knowledge and experience of everyday life which is embedded in the indigenous (mostly Indian) languages. In a Danish context such questions seem less relevant – right until the children of the former Yugoslavian and Turkish worker migrant come to school.

The research on first and second language seems to indicate that the strong development of the mother tongue is the best individual resource for learning the majority language (Skuttnab-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010) – suggesting that the experience embedded in mother tongue are the necessary condition for the learning and knowing capability of individuals. This specific insight in relation between first and second language is in line with a general theoretical understanding of language and socialization. Language is a medium for the individual sensual experience, as well as, for elaborating cultural experiences historically. Hence the mother tongue is essential for basic socialization, even when the medium in the wider society is a second language (Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012).

Literacy is (mainly) related to reading and writing – which is already different from oral language. Written language is a key competence in modern societies enabling communication and knowledge transfer across time and space. Societalization creates a fundamental tension between immediate (local, situated) and mediated human experience, which requires reading and writing competences for the individual. When printing technology created the industrial basis of the literate modernity, it reinforced this duality. The modern experience of the world wasmainly a language-mediated experience.

In the meantime new cultural techniques are added, for example “numeracy” – handling numbers and mathematical modeling (Johansen&Wedege, 2002), computer skills and foreign language. Information and communication technology necessitates new reading and writing skills in order to be a competent member of society, but may also relativize the importance of traditional written language skills. Digital technology is probably proclaiming a new and more radical version of the same – or possibly a qualitative new relation to reality, an extended version of sensual access. Whereas literacy has in the history of Europe been the key to the establishment of modern societies in the form of nation states, it is already transformed into the function of providing heterogeneity and coherence in a more functional sense. And it seems appropriate to see literacy as a privileged element within a wider notion of cultural techniques (Salling Olesen 2004). Although complicating and enhancing the question about literacy and language it emphasizes the basic historical experience that literacy is a key to the establishment of modern societies, and therefore also to understanding societalization in the sense of integrating limited and local communities in a wider society in the future of globalization. This brings us to the question of community education.

*Community Education and Popular Education: Struggles about the Societal Atmosphere*

All the different types of community and popular education are based in a community of people defined by location, religion, cultural values, or political assumption, and often have a perspective of social, cultural, and political self-articulation. The Danish early history of adult education is an example of a proactive social initiative in which the peasants’ class developed their own schools, their own world view and life perspective referring to the Nordic popular cultural heritage and also pre-Christian religious mythology. The first folk High Schools were established from 1844. Their precondition was obviously the agricultural reforms of late 18th century, and the development of a class of independent farmers. They were used by young maidens and farm hands in the quiet seasons of agriculture. It seems that these schools did not only nurture an emerging cultural self confidence of the peasants but also contributed to technical knowledge exchange which enabled a high productivity in the agriculture in spite of the small farms, and to the development of an advanced cooperative organization of the food production (village freezers, dairies, slaughter houses). It lay the foundation to an early development of food production which has had long lines of impact in food industry (export brands like “Lurpak”) and in global export of 3rd and 4th level derivates of agriculture (turn-key dairies and breweries, bio-technological research). The most interesting in this context, however, is that the movementbased in popular culture, became one of the leading forces in Danish democracy.

When a labor movement emerged from the 1880’es based in craft and a limited industry and gained strength with industry in the beginning of the new century the two class movements secured the implementation of the constitution. The dominant stream in the labor movement was social democratic, mainly focused on social security for urban working class, and in alliance with social liberal fraction of small peasants they promoted a new version of popular policy of equality and protection of vulnerable individuals. In spite of harsh political struggles during the crisis in 1930’es between self-owning peasants and working class a kind of class consensus about education was established during World War II. A committee which drafted a new framework of adult education synthesized the education traditions of folk high schools and working class evening classes in a national ideology of “popular education”. Practically it should be implemented in the form of state subsidy for community and social movement based education – but in turn it became a basic ideology of educational policies at all. There was of course also a more class struggle oriented idea of education in the labor movement, but it was put to the background by the construction of “popular education”, and by its later implementation in an egalitarian school system, in Danish also named “the Popular School”.

Community education is based in pockets of social and cultural life that provide a productive space for self-articulation, and is often perceived as a free space for learning that is relatively independent of societal conditions and constraints. However, many typical cases of community and popular education are based on resistance against some of the influences of modernization, for example in minority and peripheral communities that are marginalized and/or impoverished by capitalist modernization and centralization. Independent of whether these communities see learning as explicitly political or not, learning is part of an attempt to create a public sphere of their own or set the cultural framework of understanding on a societal level. Paradoxically, out of the dynamics in closed communities and popular education based on specific socioeconomic and cultural circumstances may – sometimes - grow a contribution a strong civil society - structural characteristic of modernity. In spite of the fact that the independent Danish folk high school education was based on an anti-modern, romantic ideology, it produced the experience of popular self-regulation and self-organization, which also in later developments contributed strongly to establishing a modern democracy in Denmark. (Korsgaard, 2008; Olesen, 1989). Together with the universalistic approach in the labor movement (the popular rather than class oriented position) it enabled a basically anti-academic, informal notion of education, uniting egalitarian and liberal principles, which has had a very durable influence in Education policy in the rest of the century.

The dialectic between particularistic communities or social movements and universalistic aspirations is particularly pointed in relation to work and workers’ learning. Since the main driving force of modernization has been capitalist industrialization, the most important popular education activity in Europe in the previous century was the one of the labor movement and trade unions. Industry formed the life conditions in (urban) communities, and the labor movement in most countries organized working-class culture and its learning institutions, first as a resistance solidarity movement, then gradually as a more proactive cultural self-articulation and political movement. In Denmark and the Nordic countries the labor movement became the most important organizer of liberal adult education, leisure learning activities etc. You can see this development as a successful result of the engagement of the state and the municipalities in the support of free adult education. In most other countries the labor movement is less influential on the state level. But then, in some cases, community education is connected with, and underpinned by alternatives to the dominant capitalist economy – in the form of cooperative economies – prominently in the Basque country and also at a smaller scale in some of the most developed capitalist countries (e.g. Canada, Italy).

It is obvious that labor movement education activities are in one sense a product of an active resistance against some of the effects of modernization, similar to the culture of many communities that have been marginalized or impoverished by modernization. It is a clearly partial culture defined by political and trade union action, or at least by a general class perspective. Unlike many local and minority communities, however, labor movement education activities in some countries has developed an universalistic perspective, challenging individualistic liberalism with ideas about equality and solidarity on behalf of the whole population. The political struggles between different types of Socialism can be seen as different versions of an universalistic aspiration – communist, social democratic, anarchist, and syndicalist – that each carry in them more or less ambitious aspirations of social justice and a new level of democracy beyond capitalism. The real histories of different countries have provided a variety of working-class cultures and not just labor movement experiences, as well as some in which universalistic aspirations turned into totalitarian power. In Denmark a relatively limited working class movement to a substantial extent allied with the peasant and small entrepreneurs, and in social affairs with the “social-liberal” fraction of small peasants who broke off from the bigger farmers on the political scene as early as 1905. This alliance accounted for a general social security concern for the poor and week population and formed a center-left backbone in parliamentary politics that has been virulent through most of the 20th century.

Seen in a societal perspective, popular education comes out of rural and urban communities generated by modernization itself. They are formed by the specific histories of modernization and they take advantage of one of the effects of modernization, namely the existence of a space for non-coerced social organization, what we in modernization theory call civil society. The societalization – from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft in the notions of the classical sociologists – eradicates or restructures communities at the same time as political struggles extend the space of relatively free cultural activity. The juridical basic rights and economic affluence in modernized parts of the world create the societal basis of this civil society. Many single-cause movements and actions have a similar profile as community action of resistance or opposition though not necessarily founded in a community. But it seems that contemporary popular education must have its potential base in the organization of citizenship to deal with societal issues on a level and with an outlook adequate for contemporary society as a whole.

The bourgeois public sphere as the communicative framework of civil society in Europe corresponds largely with the nation-state and ideas of formal (state) democracy. At the same time, global capitalism has in several ways bypassed this structure. Structurally, by its international operation and concentrations of power and capital in organizations larger than many states, creating a democratic deficit. Culturally, by the media and consumer cultures which take active part in the shaping of desires, fantasies, and preferences. There is no real international civil society because its development depends on shared language and means of communication. One may see international labor organizations and forms of organizations like World Social Forum as – very fragile – civil society responses to this situation. And may be the development of internet and social fora as potential trans-national communication forms.

*Learning for Work, or Human Resource Development for unlimited employability*

In traditional societies, intergenerational transfer of knowledge and competences enables the reproduction of the labor force. Modernization has brought basic school education and some specialized institutions for academic and professional education – generally serving as basic, lifelong qualifications in the initial career. In some countries – mostly in Central and North Europe – there has been an early institutional apprenticeship system, especially in the traditional crafts, under the control of Guilds or similar associative organization. In Denmark the trade unions have from the beginning been structured around the crafts and the apprenticeships have been overlooked by a tri-partite organization of unions, employers and the state. In advanced capitalist societies, when changes in work processes and labor market happen faster than the generational turnover in the labor force, this mode of transfer has increasingly come under pressure.

Vocational education and training in adult life has in most countries been left to employers and the individual worker. The consequences have typically been a general market failure (i.e., underinvestment) and a very unequal distribution of training resources. Big industrial employers have in some cases been able to secure up-skilling of their own employees, but not mobility across sectors and competence levels. When the relatively late Danish industry development accelerated post World War II the apprenticeship system for some years was able to deliver labor that was trained for work, but were employed in different trades than their original apprenticeship. In Nordic countries, training of workers became part of welfare state policies. In Denmark, with its late development of an industrial economy urban industries needed skilled workers. There was a growing surplus of labor in agriculture, rural workers needed skills and socialization for industry. A separate new strand in adult education developed to support a rapid migration from rural to urban life, from agriculture to industry. In order to facilitate the transition from agriculture to urban employments a whole new adult education and training system was established, with a tri-partite governance and mainly funded by the state. From around 1960 this system facilitated workers not only to move but to become skilled workers in urban trades like metal industry, construction, shipbuilding. What became later known as the flexicurity model (Jørgensen and Madsen, 2007) consisted mainly of adult education and training together with relatively good unemployment benefits. This combination enabled a flexible labor market and a less conservative/defensive policy from trade unions and employees than in a number of European countries in periods of economic growth. In the period of crisis and stagflation in the 1970s, continuing education was redirected/enhanced to take care of more long-term competence development for the more vulnerable segments of the labor force (e.g., women, young people without vocational qualification, and others), and also developed high quality education in new employment areas like logistics, industrial construction techniques, process industry (food and drugs), plastic – and more.

Needless to say, these policies provide a high degree of integration in the work force, and were especially for unskilled workers a way of obtaining education on reasonable conditions that would otherwise not have been realistic. Like other Nordic countries Denmark has very high scores in adult participation in learning. Moreover, the adult vocational training programs have better than any other adult education system been able to engage those adult learners who are generally regarded the least motivated - unskilled workers, especially male (Kondrup, 2013). In the period of neo-liberal politics the funding programs have been substantially changed, and the activity has gone down. At the same time the “hangover” of a crafts based structure of vocational education has become critical in spite of several attempts to reform the basic apprenticeship system for youth. Denmark faces a challenge of reconstructing the basic and continuing vocational education and training so that they provide up-to-date key competences. In the neoliberal policy agenda the focus is on “employability” under all circumstances – but there is little positive idea about what this would entail. On the other hand it seems clear that the crafts based skills are becoming obsolete – for a long time the traditional VET education has survived more on their basic work socialization than on their specific competence profile.

Recently, adult learning seems to have assumed a more universal or all-embracing nature in all the advanced capitalist countries. As long as the development of work takes the form of strong division of labor based on mass unskilled wage labor, societal needs remain limited to training and retraining specialists and highly skilled craftspeople. However, with the development of postindustrial forms of work organization, a need for broader adult education emerges. The societal demand for knowledge economy has changed to include what were mostly called soft skills (e.g. communicative and collaborative skills, quality consciousness, professional attitudes,

And self-confidence) as well as literacy and new cultural techniques (e.g. numeracy and mathematic understanding, and computer literacy). Work-related learning seems to become broader and deeper and increasingly interferes with personal needs and identity (Olesen, 2005; 2013). It seems obvious that the Danish adult education and training experience is relatively well prepared to meet these new needs. This is due to the combination of a long lasting and comprehensive influence of the free adult education – based in popular education and liberal school pedagogy – and the welfare security systems which are necessary to support a “quality social demand” in a capitalist labor market, i.e. a social demand not linked to very narrow employer interests and limited by workers’ immediate livelihood needs. Nevertheless, it is obvious in the rhetoric of life-long learning that economic concerns and the focus on employment and work are determining factors. This can be seen as a very local view on global development. The most developed economies can hope to maintain their relative competitive advantage in a division of labor where they take care of knowledge-based, complex work and the service work for themselves, whereas developing countries deliver raw materials and build up low-tech industrial production.

The political consensus about lifelong learning of competences may not be so easy to maintain in this narrow key. Rather, the focus on work and human resource development may raise issues of control and the quality of work. The ideas of a knowledge-based economy have been criticized from several perspectives. One applies a wider, ecological perspective on work and learning, questioning the inward colonialism of human life without boundaries (Hochschild, 1997) and its cultural consequences (Sennett, 1998; Negt, 1984). The requirements on human flexibility and adaptation may erode the conditions of socialization and subjectivity, that is, the human resources on the whole. Another perspective emphasizes the direct political aspect of learning in which labor movements should take the opportunity to advance a politicization of work, including environmental questions, ownership, and use value of production, drawing on vanguard experiences of cooperative enterprises (e.g. The Mondragon cooperative – Antoni and Campbell, 1983), projects for conversion of production (Lucas Aerospace and others), and a vision of self-regulated work (Forrester, 2007). The dramatic emergence of the climate crisis and the fragility of the capitalist world economy underscore the need for more comprehensive perspectives on work and learning.

The highest probability seems to outline a neoliberal scenario of an individualized competence market, which will be subsumed into a global labor market. However, it also seems likely that this competence market will show an unprecedented example of market failure – and it will definitely have extreme effects in terms of inequality and the colonization of human labor. The question is whether there is another scenario in which the actual significance of the labor force as a subjective factor in the economy can be turned into individual and collective self-regulation of work and learning. This seems to be the open question that places the discussion about learning for work and the workers’ role in the development of work as a central issue in global politics. In the present phase the key questions seems to be the organization of workers to match the global capitalism, especially in the growing economies. Education and learning will play an absolute key role in maturing ideas of self regulation – both in terms of political engagement, and in terms of obtaining necessary key competences for a viable alternative work life arrangement.

The resources for any alternative to neoliberal global capitalism must to some extent be found in institutional practices, embodied experiences of the past, social organizations, and experiences of trade unions and other cultural organizations. They are present in the forms and levels of education, expectations, and preferences of young people as well as adults, but they do not form a simple and coherent alternative. While the new discourses of lifelong learning are international, Anglophone, and relatively homogenous, adult-education traditions have many names: popular education, community education, **[educação](http://www.mec.gov.br/)** popular, politische bildung, liberal education, folkeoplysning, folkbildning, formation des adultes, formazione popular, volksbildung, and citizenship education to name a few. In adult education discussions, these many names give rise to translation problems – they do not have the same meaning because meaning is related to societal and cultural context. In this way the nuances are a key to better understanding the contexts and resources in each of these different traditions.

*Functions of Adult Learning in the globalizing Context*

The exploration of the historical function of adult learning by means of the notion of modernization may be a take-off for an open discussion of the very concept of modernization itself. The main types of adult education form strands of historical functionality over long periods of time, and in this sense confirm a societal function analysis. Analyzing them in terms of modernization may however present a simplistic scheme: literacy enables modernization by enabling the participation of the general population in communication independent of time and space; popular education advances the cultural reproduction of communities to cultural construction and self-articulation, eventually to a level of collective self-assertion and political activism; and continuing education and training for work aligns individual competence-building cycles with an accelerated and distributed organization of societal work in global capitalism. The local examples reveal a greater complexity.

The reference to the specific Danish history highlights two points: The first is that modernization is a broader homogenizing process but is also produced by local forces and resources that are not necessarily preoccupied with societal modernization – actually often resisting its effects on the local level. The Danish process of modernization, although linked with the major European history from Protestantism to the constitution of a German nation state is also related to very local social and cultural circumstances – and in the last 100+ years together with the other Nordic countries forming an exceptional case of social democrat welfare societies even though these countries have very different geographical and economic conditions. The societal function of adult education must be studied in concrete contexts, regarding the interplay with socioeconomic, political, and cultural history. Socioeconomic modernization and the type of learning needed and enabled are mutually interrelated, but institutional developments also set general conditions of this process. When and what type of adult education contributes to modernization (the level of general schooling and the influence on school by church and class movements), and political circumstances, may form very specific conditions and challenges (e.g. the Entnazifizierung as a (conquerors’) project for political education in Germany after World War II, or the role of Comissiones Obreras and Barrio-organization in Spain under a long-lasting dictatorship).

The second is the point of specificity. Epistemologically this point of specificity can be transferred to the globalization process: In order to understand the inner contradictions and open opportunities of the process we need to look at the material and cultural contradictions in specific (local) processes which together make up “globalization” – and of course also not neglect the relations of dominance involved. It is a mistake to see the globalization process as one process inferred from outside and washing away local history and difference. And furthermore: This way of analyzing excludes the possibility to identify experiences and desires which could between a global integration process and the real (material) dynamics specificities of different local versions of it. Today, on a global scale, we may ask whether modernization is just one process.

In a broader and more analytical key, questions have been raised about “peripheral modernization”, that is: what are the specific characteristics and conditions of modernization in countries and regions that have had a modernization process pushed and influenced, but not entirely determined by colonial rule (e.g. Brazil).

In postcolonial theory and political discussion, the emphasis on difference and multiple histories serves to demonstrate the overcoming of the modernist tale or vision of a rational evolution toward a better society. Sometimes the argument that modernization should not be seen as a continuous progress gets confused with the assumption that there was and is no modernization process at all. In a generalized discussion of global capitalism one may at the same time observe a pessimistic view of one culturally homogenized world (McDonaldization) and much more relativistic postcolonial theory. Both fail to grasp the complexity of the globalizing process because they look at it as one process that must be put on a formula – or may be even, unintentedly, try to put a formula on to the process. If we instead – insist on a materialist perspective also on globalization and an assumption of endogeneity we can investigate a number of processes, based in local and specific histories but increasingly interfering.

Having said that, what is the role of learning in the globalization processes? Learning, and not least adult learning, is a necessary component of societal development because individuals have to discover and define themselves in an ever changing environment. But learning is also the distinctive factor which determines which globalization we get. It is essential to maintain that the possible futures of late modernity or postmodernity are a matter of social agency and hence also of learning processes taking place now. “Lifelong learning” implies a new discourse that brings learning beyond institutional education and into social reality. However, the lifelong learning discourse has been heavily influenced by neoliberal politics and human capital theory, and the world is relatively short of alternative ideas that can embrace the critique of educational institutions without accepting the neoliberal economic rationale. The options available are societally and subjectively conditioned by experiences and resources of the past. I have here drawn the attention to a long-lasting influence of the popular education tradition in my own country, which formed the ideological basis for a relatively democratic and liberal provision of formal and higher education, as well as adult education, in a “social democrat” welfare state environment. Others must be sought in Latin America, South Africa, China, and other particular pathways of modernization.

Modernization is still an uncompleted development even in its original centers. While it seems that globalization brings forward further homogeneity, there are also factors that tend to enable a multicentered and polyphonic global world. The fact that China has had its own almost independent cultural and social pathway, which is now – forcefully – joining global capitalism, forms an exciting experiment for the relation between human socialization and societal development. Oskar Negt calls it ‘‘the greatest social experiment in our time’’ (Negt, 1988/2007) in his discussion of the modernization(s) in China in the perspective of European modernization since the European Renaissance. We may most productively see modernization as an infinite process that is still dependent on human efforts and choices on individual, as well as on global level.

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