

## **<sup>1</sup>Independent Working Class Education: the lost sonnet of impossibilism.**

The British working class needs a “creative school of British Marxism, not a hole-in-the-corner affair but a live body of critical, creative first-rate minds who understand the present and are organically part of the active working-class movement”. (Maurice Dobb writing in 1927 and quoted by Macintyre, S. 1980, p. 112).

Current interest in the formation of Independent Working Class Education is driven by an impasse in the provision of working class adult education. In 2010 the then new Coalition Government amid claims of a crisis in public finance embarked on a root and branch overhaul of social provision with an average of twenty percent reduction across the budget for the social state. This resulted in major changes in the financing and delivery of all education from child care to Higher Education. It virtually ended the remaining openly advertised adult education leaving some narrowly designated and some employment related provision. One response from within the extended communities of Adult Educators and Socialists has been to explore the possibility of alternative provision. In this context the origins and history of Independent Adult Education is relevant. It was born in response to the embrace of the state and was sustained by working class organisations at a distance from state provision.

Independent Working Class Education was generated by working class political activists between 1880 and 1920. It sprang from and fuelled the radical maturing of working class political activity. Consequently, it was primarily focused on social and political questions although generic learning skills were indirectly addressed. The important army of men and women who created organisations or who managed local branches of organisations acquired their skills, experience and self-confidence in the service of others. The habits of their youth or from their parents inherited from chapel goers and Chartists were appropriated and employed in new circumstances. The synthesis of ideas and practice was distilled by the early Socialist organisations SDL/SDF/SLP, the ILP and the Fabian Society. The emphasis was on personal engagement with literature and argument. So that individual

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<sup>1</sup> The appellation ‘Impossibilists’ was adopted by T. Jackson and comrades to describe their defence of Marxism (Simon, 1965, p. 300) see p. 21 this essay. They may have also had in mind Hyndman’s association with the actions of the French Possibilists in opposing the formation of the Second International (Thompson, 1976, p. 534).

study and participation in a small group are part of that tradition. The main focus was on developing, from a working class point of view, an understanding of the principal issues of the day. In practice IWCE focused on the key questions which the evolving industrial working class faced as the subordinate class in a capitalist society.

### **The context of capitalist crisis.**

Commencing in 2008 the global economy became engulfed in a major crisis largely, but according to many commentators not exclusively, originating in the financialisation of the global economy. Among Marxist commentators a key area of argument was whether the global crisis was a crisis produced by the inherent nature of capitalism to have periodic crises of overproduction induced by the declining rate of profit (See Mattick, 2011, Brenner,2006. Smith,2010.Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010). This argument encouraged a reprise of the debate about the business cycle and the 'long waves of capitalist development' (Brenner,2006. Mandel,1995.) The global crisis expressed itself in a series of 'sovereign debt' crises affecting those countries which had been leading the neo-liberal agenda. However, in Europe the global crisis disproportionately damaged the national economies of countries on the periphery of European neo-liberalism. The outward expressions of the sovereign debt crises were massive national debts encouraging governments to adopt policies, under the slogans of 'austerity' or 'efficiency' to reduce the debt. In the process they abandoned policies aimed at supporting growth, which probably exacerbated the crisis. Unemployment increased, welfare and social policies were cut and the social gains achieved by political activity over the previous century were attacked. Individual health, welfare and security became the price which governments demanded of its people, and the numbers unemployed steadily grew. A more nuanced view of the crisis includes much of the same description but challenges the rationale. The 2008 collapse of the global financial system led some commentators to speculate that this represented the failure of neo-liberalism (Birch and Mykhnenko,2010). However, the suggestion that neo-liberalism has failed does not necessarily imply that the period has been brought to an end. Neo-liberalism has been

characterised by the primacy of private or corporate capital in global policy. The development of individual government policies have been guided by their preference for and accommodation with global capital. It was argued that because global capital could freely move that governments should take the initiative in building capital friendly policies. In the period since 2008 the policies adopted in response to the crisis have accelerated the neo-liberal approach. The autocratic collapsing of democratic practice in Greece and Italy by the imposition of non-elected technocrats to replace elected leaders was only a more extreme expression of the directive interference which had previously been applied in the Republic of Ireland. This prompted one commentator to respond with the observation that national governments in Europe, including the UK, faced two sovereigns: on the one hand they faced their people and their democracy and on the other hand they faced the demands of global capital (Streeck, *Ibid.*, p.64).

Increasingly across Europe, and there is some evidence across the USA, the crisis of the economy is building a crisis of consent. Political parties are being challenged by their supporters to provide a believable rationale. Although this is true of all political parties it is particularly true for parties which represent, or claim to represent, working class interests. In Greece, Italy, France and Spain the traditional leaderships of the Socialist parties are experiencing a serious challenge from the radical 'left'. In the UK the Labour leadership have adopted a general stance of offering a less obnoxious version of the policies being pursued by the government. Criticism and dissent within the Labour Party has, so far, been contained. However, trade union dissatisfaction is beginning to be publicly voiced and there has been a significant expansion of political activity outside of the Labour Party, which has been mirrored by an increase in the interest shown in the writings and Marx and later Marxists, for example the new study by Terry Eagleton 'Why Marx Was Right' (2011). This activity has been reflected in the increase in the serious study of the ideas of Marx in universities. Although not easy to quantify, this level of activity is greater than at any time since the period 1966-1976. The certainties of a generation are being challenged.

### **The formation of the working class.**

The formation of the working class, in England, was a process of gut-wrenching pain for those captured by its motion (Thompson, 1963). They were torn by necessity from a life, even if increasingly difficult and uncomfortable, which they knew, and thrown into the uncertainty of urban and industrial living. This prompted one social commentator to refer to the new urban industrial working class as a "...landless stranger in his own country..." (Quote from Sydney Webb by Harrison,R. 2000, p.60,footnote). The precarious nature of their new existence was garnered by the uncertainty of income, work and pay, the prospect of debtor's prison or the poor house.

Overcrowding, poor sanitation, poor health and crime, provided a daily back-cloth to their sense of being, absence of self-confidence and the way they saw themselves and saw others. The social barriers constructed by the wealthy and the well dressed were rewarded with daily acts of deference and obsequiousness confirming the social hierarchy ( Jones,G.S.,1983 ). Two or three generations of incoming urban dwellers coexisted in this fermenting and maturing social brew. Those who had been born into this milieu knew nothing else, from personal experience, but they lived and learned alongside parents or grand-parents and even alongside recent immigrants, each with their memories and stories of a different life, which was stored in the folk-memory as a better life.

The growth of major towns and cities with more than a million inhabitants in each also reflected the mass exodus from rural life and rural occupations. This was a gradual process and the transition was not cleanly cut. As with all transitions, elements of the old and the new coexisted over generations. In some cases new towns evolved out of old villages. New industries evolved out of rural but industrialised crafts (Thompson,Ibid.,pp.405,445). Individual peasants migrated uneasily between the two. For the best part of a century the transformation was driven by political repression and economic exploitation (Thompson, Ibid., pp.193-199). Writers of the day contrasted their memories of a better and rural past with their new but bitter present (See the quotation from Thelwell by

Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.143). Indeed, Thompson quotes Hopkins referring to the life for urban workers as 'misery' (Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.142-143).

This heady mixture contributed two important elements to the emerging working class and its collective sense of being. It fuelled a romantic harking back to a supposed rural and idyllic life and it did so by emphasising the dark and satanic mills (Williams, 1975). It also evolved a sense of class to develop a new identity. This was built out of shared and common features and experiences, including a recognition of their shared separation from their labour (Williams, 1984, pp60-9). It was also built out of their deeply felt sense of difference from those who controlled and shaped their lives and destiny. These included the titled landowners, the factory owners and most of the professional workers (Thompson, *Op.cit.*, pp.711-715). Classes are generated by the material life in which its members find themselves and by how they see themselves. They are relationships which are constantly evolving (Thompson, *Ibid.*, pp.9-13). Thompson expresses this in the following words: "...class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs." (Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.9) This sense of class was tribal and feral. It sweated from the collective pores proclaiming 'we are not you'. Over the years this became 'we are not who you think we are' and ultimately fed the ambitions of the political minority. The demands for 'independent' political representation and for 'independent working class education' were cultivated from this material.

The social emergence of the new working class, its recognition, by society, was initially a recognition of shared origins and position in society. Some recognition of shared destinies became the consequence of social and socialist agitation. However, the shared recognition of shared determination was delayed. The century long rural-urban migration mitigated social and political cohesion. This was recognised by William Morris, Writing in the *Labour Prophet* in January 1894, he anticipated: "...The first act of the great Class War has begun, for the workmen are claiming their

recognition as citizens...” In the same article he described how the agitation by Socialists had previously had little influence (Quoted by Thompson,1977,p.612). In this article, he described how the working class “...seemed incapable of conceiving any better state of society than that which allowed them to live in a condition of inferiority, in return for keeping that society alive by their labour. They did not even understand that they were a class, but practically accepted the position assigned to them by the well-to-do, of their being the fortuitous dregs of industry in successful competition for riches.” (Quoted by Anderson,1980,p.183, footnote 12). By the time of his article in *Justice* in May 1895, he was expressing clearly the logic of his Socialist argument that: “To the Socialist the aim is not the improvement of condition but the *change of position* of the working-classes”. (Quoted in Anderson, Ibid.,p.194, original emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

### **The background to working class education.**

In the late nineteenth century the importance of education was being increasingly understood. The demands for literacy, numeracy, and increasingly, technical knowledge were becoming key features of an economy being transformed by industry and technical developments in response to intensifying Imperial competition. The industrialisation of the economy proceeded in consort with urbanisation. This combined impulse for general education to sustain a changing social and economic society also raised challenges for the character of the new social framework. Victorian and Edwardian social values were framed and transmitted through the church and chapel, although it is necessary to distinguish the much more radical influence of some chapels from that of the church. Their combined influence was to frame the social and the economic impulses for education in the language of faith. Edward Thompson describes the collision of ideas about faith with those associated with the French Revolution (Thompson,Ibid., pp.56-7). This indicated the enduring

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<sup>2</sup> William Morris was writing about the relations between social classes and identifying that they were pervasive power relationships some thirty years before these themes were addressed by Gramsci. He offered insights of significance which were not incorporated into developing Socialist theory until after they had been addressed by Gramsci. See the discussion by Perry Anderson (1980,pp.176-194).

influence of the French Revolution on the perceptions of many people from different classes which contributed to the differences between the social classes.

The pressures on the new working class to acquire education were not all external. Within the working class itself some of the external impulses were reflected, for example, workers began to understand the value of education in finding employment, or improving their job and increasing their wage, or in becoming an accepted member of the local faith community. Economic and social advantage was a demonstrable consequence, for the worker, with educational competence. It became an increasingly familiar refrain of working class popular ideology that parents recognised that education was the way for their children to 'get on'. Yet within working class communities there was also a tradition, inherited from forebears, of self-sufficiency. The classic examples of Tom Paine and Joseph Arch can be augmented with examples of formidable women all of them discovered the value of learning for itself or to sustain a critical engagement with the dominant discourse of society (See Mitchell, H. 1968). In summary, the pathway which led the working class to engagement with education included the major rationales of economic necessity, spiritual devotion and class identity.

The workers demand for Independent Working Class Education was generated in the crucible of changing class relations before 1914. In the UK the agitation around the slogan was part of the agitation for 'Socialism'. It is no accident that one of the earliest workers parties was the Independent Labour Party. The emphasis on 'Independent' was a distinguishing part of the identity of the new workers politics. The term 'independent' had been employed by Burdett, in 1804, as a slogan for reform (Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.458). It acquired wider political currency in the opposition to the Whig ascendancy as a shorthand reference to being free from 'patronage', 'bribery' and 'deference' (Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.467). It became an integral element of nascent working class politics following its adoption by Luddism to underscore their opposition to the employers and the states control over their lives (Thompson, *Ibid.*, p.601). Working class political activity, in the late nineteenth century, became focused on parliament by either supporting radical Liberals or securing

working class representation as Lib Lab MPs. In 1892, Keir Hardie, John Burns and J.Havelock Wilson were able to break that mould and to win elections as 'Independent' Labour candidates in three English constituencies (Cole and Postgate, pp.433-434). This electoral success was built on the earlier success of the establishment of the Scottish Labour Party (1887-1889) and Hardie, who was one of the founders of the SLP, understood the importance of political activity as 'education'. The formation of different expectations and different understanding could be the precursor to trust and participation (Cole and Postgate, *ibid.*). According to Cole and Postgate: Hardie "...wished to bring the working class first to the decision to insist on independent Labour representation, and from that to trust the experience of facts and the educational power of propaganda to get them to adopt Socialism..." (Cole and Postgate, *ibid.*, p.433).

The association of independence from existing political organisations for working class aims was bound up with the emergence of the participation of unskilled workers in general trade unions. It had been the association of the early trade unions with Liberal politics which focused the response of the new unions and the new politics. The emphasis was clearly on what was practical and what was achievable. Consequently, education was understood to include new understanding via propaganda and experience. As Brian Simon (1965) has shown, it was much later that education acquired a more ambitious definition including developing workers knowledge.

A key feature in the workers campaign for education was the success of persuading the TUC to support the campaign. This was expressed with the decision of the TUC to issue a circular in 1900 which was endorsed at the Congress of 1900 (Simon, *ibid.*, pp.197-98). The essence of the TUC position was that it was in the national interest that there should be free education for all who require it, it should be managed and controlled by democratically accountable local bodies such as local councils, it should be funded at public expense, it should be secular in character and exclude sectarian religious influences. After 1900 there were three sets of statutory proposals for change of the education system. The 1902 Act established a national framework of infant and junior education



with some provision of Secondary education, for those who could afford it, until the age of thirteen (Simon, *Ibid.* p.359) Discussions during 1917-18 eventually, in August 1918, resulted in the Further Education Act which enabled some, privately funded, provision up to the age of 18. Draft Proposals included clauses to end all forms of child labour but these were strenuously opposed by the Federation of British Industry (forerunners of the Confederation of British Industry) (Simon, *Ibid.*, pp.352-355). The third and, arguably most significant was the Education Act of 1944 which established free secondary education for all (Simon, *Ibid.* p358). This was to be predominantly secular and controlled by democratically elected and accountable Local Authorities. The Act also made it a duty of every Local Education Authority to 'secure provision' for different forms of education beyond Secondary Education (Harrison, J. P.314).

### **Education and the working class**

Following some twenty years of unprecedented prosperity with rapid industrial development and with colonial expansion (1850-1870), there followed the 'Great Depression' (1876-1896) (Simon, *Op.Cit.* 1965, p.17). It was in this latter period that the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was formed in 1884 and 'New Unionism' the founding of new general trade unions was founded in the late 1880s. It was also in this period that working class politics concentrated on education. This is evidenced by the attention given to the issue by a range of quite different prominent writers and reformers and by the number of general trade union banners, from the period, declaring support for "Educate, Agitate, Organise". This clear expression of independent organisation and political activity which involved a break with liberalism (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.18) associated with this nascent working class ambition for education helped shape the activity of organised labour and socialists for the next one hundred years. It was Tom Paine, who developed an argument in favour of democracy which emphasised the importance of independence from the state (Hobsbawm, 1968, Ch.1). Jeremy Bentham and James Mill argued that the education of the 'labouring poor' would enable them to recognise that they had an identity of interest with capital in opposition to the landed aristocracy

(Simon, Op.Cit., p.12). William Morris became a supporter of Marx and a founder of the Socialist League. His arguments and his example in favour of education are particularly interesting. His considerable contribution to art and craft continues to find a resonance. He established the Red house, Kelmscott Press and the firm, which produced, among other things, fabrics and furniture (Henderson, 1967). This commercial activity was undertaken with considerable attention to the quality of the items being produced (Thompson, Op.cit., pp.90-109). He personally collaborated with the craftsmen regarding the design and creation of dyes but he particularly collaborated with their further development as craftsmen. He never lost sight of the value of careful vocational preparation and continuous improvement. With this he emphasised the material, and the spiritual, benefits for themselves and for the whole world which would follow the development of general education for all. He also emphasised the way that education could enrich all lives and serve our full lives rather than merely our material and instrumental needs: "Will education be a system of cram begun on us when we are four years old, and left off sharply when we are eighteen? Shall we be ashamed of our love and our hunger and our mirth,..." (Quoted by Thompson, 1977, p.725). Continuous improvement was expressed by emphasising 'desires': "...to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way..." (Thompson, Ibid., p.791). His argument also strategically recognised that education could play an important role in the conflict between capital and labour. Education, he insisted, could assist "...a body of able, high-minded, competent men, who should act as instructors of the masses and as their leaders during critical periods of the movement...a great proportion of these instructors and organisers should be working men..." (Quoted by Simon, Ibid., p.25-6).

The views of Sydney Webb are also important because of his influence across a range of areas activity in which labour came into contact with the state. He was influential in the establishment of School Boards, the later Education Act of 1902 which appeared in the year following publication of his Fabian Tract 106, and the establishment of the London Education Authority (Harrison, R. 2000, pp.298-304). Sydney Webb, along with Beatrice, was also the principal writer of the Minority report

of the Poor Law Commission published in 1909 which "...anticipates with great accuracy the entire development of social legislation since that date..." (Nairn, 1964, part 1, p.47). Finally, he was a principal author of the 1918 Rules and Constitution of the Labour Party (Pelling, 1972, pp.42-44). He was opposed to the influence of the church in education, and was strongly in favour of technical education. Above all he was in favour of universal education because it was appropriate for everyone to develop their full faculties. He was in favour of all people being efficient, and their education would make that possible, and he was in favour of an efficient society, and this could be made possible by the different contributions of all individuals (Harrison, R.Op.Cit., p.301). Finally, his educational vision was of a ladder uniting elementary and university education since this offered an administrative unity (Harrison, Ibid., p.301). Unfortunately, even within the Fabian perspective it was not necessarily anticipated that workers should become the 'able and competent men' that had been visualised by Morris. The generation of Socialist intellectual understanding was a role reserved for a small group of persons, predominantly within the Fabian organisation and based in London.

It was not that these, and other writers shared a common approach, it was that they addressed the significance of education for the working class. This issue was, consequently, an issue at the heart of working class politics. However, the vision of an independent approach was to be overshadowed by the growing influence of Fabian gradualism and its endeavours to tame capitalism through elections. In 1912 in a broadside against syndicalism, Ramsey Macdonald indicated a measure of the opposition when he wrote that socialism "...must begin with the facts of social unity, not with those of class conflict, because the former is the predominant fact in society..." (Quoted by Nairn, Op.Cit., part 1, p.52).

It is appropriate to refer to three examples of significant initiatives to engage working people<sup>3</sup>, as adults, in education. In different ways each of these initiatives had not succeeded. The Mechanics' Institutes, a first example, were founded and flourished in the years before 1870. Although, the first

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<sup>3</sup> The apparent absence of women is explored by Rowbotham (1981), Thompson.J. (1987) and Rees (1984,p.6). See also, Thompson, E.P. 1963, pp.421,601,730-731.

was in London the most numerous were concentrated in the cotton towns of West Yorkshire and East Lancashire (Harrison,1961, pp.58-62). They were established from fund-raising by the manufacturing middle-class. The Bradford Institute offers an interesting but untypical picture in which local 'artisans' exercised control. In most other cases it was the local middle class which exercised management control. However, the leadership of the Bradford MI was denounced by Churchmen and Dissenters and it experienced a short life (Harrison, Ibid.,p.61). The typical activity of an Institute was that they served as a venue for the "...diffusion of useful knowledge among the middle and lower classes..." frequently in the form of lectures about science or technical issues (Harrison, Ibid., p.62-63). During their relatively short lives the Mechanics' Institutes frequently developed libraries and classes but they rarely attracted a continuous working class audience and by the time of their gradual end the most significant evidence of their presence was their legacy of respect for science. Harrison (1961) writes, about the founders of Mechanics' Institutes, that their "...hopes ... were pitched very high. They were living in an age when the vast possibilities and unsuspected marvels of Science had begun to catch the popular (middle-class) imagination; and they were still largely ignorant of the true nature of the new industrial proletariat of the manufacturing towns." (Harrison, Ibid., pp.62-63) One prominent social commentator, with great influence, T.H.Huxley, declared he had no faith in any 'source of truth' unless it was produced by scientific method (Thompson, 1977, p.129). It is argued, by Samuel, that the emphasis on science was a leitmotiv of the age and one which influenced the emergent socialism (Samuel,1980, pp.75-77).

With the collective memory influenced by Chartism and the French Revolution, it is widely recognised that industrialists, employers and politicians were seeking out ways to dampen any revolutionary spirit within the British working class. Harrison quotes a churchman founder of the Bradford Institute hoping that it would encourage workers to have respect for property and divert them from becoming 'levellers' (Harrison, J.Op.Cit., p.77). Sensitive to this central fear many Institutes banned any discussions of politics or religion (Harrison,Ibid.,p.52). This was not to deny the opinions on faith, of the founders, but to reduce the barriers which may have discouraged workers

from joining, but a far more tangible barrier was the fee which users were required to pay (Harrison, *Ibid.*, p.70). One example is from a working man who explained that he could not use the Mechanics Institute because the fees were equivalent to 30 percent of his weekly wages: "...when we have to purchase it so dearly I am afraid we shall have to remain in darkness." (Rowbotham, 1981, p.67).

It is widely accepted that middle-class society was apprehensive about the working-class and fearful of their claims for social improvement and political democracy (Harrison, R. 2000, pp.298-303.

Simon, *Op.Cit.*, pp.143-4. Cole and Postgate, *Op.Cit.*, pp.362-3). The Report of the commission on the Employment of Children of January 1842 presented considerable evidence of "...low moral

condition...an absence of moral and religious restraint...at very early ages." (Pike, 1966, pp.204-208)

Subsequent to this report initiatives to educate children and adults reflected the concern expressed in the report. It is also argued that many of the initiatives to educate working people were directed

to building social harmony (Harrison, *J.Op.Cit.*, pp.42-43). In this regard the development of

University Extension, a second example, played an important role. Originally initiated in Cambridge and Oxford the example was later followed in other university towns and cities (Simon, *Op.Cit.*,

pp.86-92). Many supporters of the Extension movement held the opinion that "...they must combine social reform and liberalism. They thought it was better to integrate the working class harmoniously and avoid class conflict and confrontation." (Rowbotham, 1981, p.64). From its origins in 1873,

Extension reached a climax in the 1890's when some 60,000 students were attending classes and lectures (Rowbotham, *Ibid.*, p.86). One example, in the North-East (Newcastle and Durham) coalfield

was subsidised by the coal-owners with the official support of the Durham Miners Association, consequently minimising the cost to the students, and was associated with the aim of promoting

employer and worker conciliation. In 1880 over 1,300 working miners attended lectures in political economy. Other subjects covered included science, literature and mining technology (Simon, *Op.Cit.*,

pp. 88-89). Although the Extension movement was primarily secular, the "...ancient universities

remained essentially seminaries for the ruling class, buttresses of church and state." (Simon, *Ibid.*,

pp.86-87). However, many of its founders held religious convictions and considered that it was religion which informed personal and social morality.

The third example of adult education before 1898 was that of the recently born socialist organisation. Created both as a response to the social condition of workers and in a response to the prevailing ideology of incorporation and social harmony. For these socialists and trade union activists the very effort of developing political and trade union organisation was an act of independence. The prevailing politics of Liberalism and its efforts to incorporate workers leaders were seen to be class based and represented the aims of the dominant classes to protect their position. The act of independence therefore defined the new politics as working class (Phillips and Putnam, 1980, p.24). The Social Democratic Federation, founded by H.M. Hyndman, grew out of the Democratic Federation founded in 1880. The SDF was created to propagate the ideas of Marx among the growing ranks of workers of London (Simon, Op.Cit., pp.23-25). Over the following years the SDF contributed to working class adult education by discussing the ideas of political economy in meetings of supporters and by public lectures, with a clear Marxist emphasis, and by directing the political activity of its supporters (Simon, Ibid., pp.29-31). By 1885 there had been a split from the SDF of the Socialist League, supported by William Morris (Thompson,1977, pp.350-382). Both Marxist organisations followed similar paths of education and propaganda. In 1893 the Independent Labour Party was formed (Simon, Ibid., p.35) The ILP was dissimilar to the SDF/SL in that it was less obviously Marxist in orientation and was in favour of seeking working class representation in Parliament (Poirier, 1958, p.114. Stewart, 1921, pp.58-84). The Fabian Society was formed in 1894 (Simon, Op.cit., p.33). As with the other socialist organisations the Fabians organised lectures and distributed publications. In 1891, for example there were some ninety Fabian lecturers giving some 1,400 Fabian lectures. A distinctive feature of the Fabians educational activity was their

corresponding classes and their “Book Box”<sup>4</sup> scheme which enabled the lecturers to share publications with their students (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.33). The combined political and educational activity of the Socialist organisations brought the working populations in most towns and cities into contact with socialist ideas and in many of these places local activists created local branches of one or more of the organisations or other forms of socialist organisations. Possibly more important, this was worker’s education, it was designed by workers for workers and was controlled by them. It represented a world view of opposition to the prevailing world view. The important point, which is emphasised by Simon, was that the political activity and the education, organised by the Socialist organisations, were inseparable. Engagement in the political activity was itself educational. The education was organised to promote the political activity. They were mutually dependent on each other, and in some senses indistinguishable.

### **Ruskin College**

The humanitarian and philanthropic ambitions of University Extension and the tutorial class movement were carried by Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard and their supporters into the establishment of Ruskin Hall in 1899 (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.311). Ruskin Hall and later Ruskin College was opened to offer an education very similar to that being offered by the Extension Movement and the WEA. They also successfully established the framework for the TUC to be drawn into support for this approach (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.319). The two principal founders had left within two years but with the help of charitable donations and some trade union sponsorship Ruskin College was founded (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.319). The new college provided a “... course of study, in the main of economics, sociology and politics” (*Ibid.*, p.311). As the 1907-08 Oxford Report makes clear, two programmes of complementary study, a one-year and a two-year programme, co-existed (Harrop, *Op.cit.*, pp.102-3).

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<sup>4</sup> The speaker/tutor would take a box of books to each of their public lectures for the use of students/participants. I recall that this was a feature of the WEA and University Extramural classes in North Derbyshire which I attended between 1963-66.

The students were young working class men drawn from many parts of industrial Britain and so were required to be residents of the college. Interestingly, the "...Ruskin Hall scheme extended beyond the residential college in Oxford. It also stimulated classes in many parts of the country, particularly in industrial areas. There were 96 such classes in existence by 1902. It also catered for correspondence students, enrolling 1,800 during its first two years. Local Ruskin Halls were also established in Manchester, Liverpool, Stockport and Birmingham..." (Fieldhouse, 1987,p.37). By 1907 Ruskin College was successfully established with some fifty residential students selected, mostly, from labour organisations (Simon, Op.cit., p.311). It had a governing body composed mainly of Oxford academics but which included trades unionists, Richard Bell of the Railway Servants and David Shackleton of the Weavers' Union (Simon,Ibid., p.318). The College Principal was Dennis Hird, an Oxford graduate, ordained in the Church of England in 1878. Over the course of his life his perspectives became influenced by Darwinism. The perspectives and claims of Darwin were received by liberal England as progressive, rational and the opposite of obscurantism (Thompson, 1977,p.140). This was at a time when the perspectives of Darwin and Marx were considered to be complementary because both were seen to be evolutionists<sup>5</sup> (Samuel, 1980, pp.75-77). He later became a socialist and joined the SDF (Simon, Op.cit., p.319). Trade union support for Ruskin College was sufficiently clear and strong by 1907 that the TUC launched a financial appeal (Simon,Ibid, p.319). Some four years later during a debate, at the annual congress in 1911, over the rival claims of Ruskin College and the Plebs Movement supporters of Plebs accused the TUC of treating Ruskin College as the official college of the TUC (Simon, Ibid., p.331 footnote 2). In practice, the TUC found a way of giving support to both (Simon, Ibid., pp319,331).

It was the strike by Ruskin College students which gave a formal expression to the slogan 'independent working class education' and a formal organisational form in the shape of the Plebs League. The significance of emphasising education was drawn from their reading of work by Daniel

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<sup>5</sup> See Thompson (1977,p.815,footnote 80). This indicates that 'Engels, Bax, Aveling, Hyndman' associated Marx and Darwin interchangeably with 'evolution'.



de Leon. Among the Ruskin students were some who were influenced by De Leon, who emphasised the importance of ideology in supporting the ruling class to rule: "...a ruling class dominates, not only the bodies but the mind also of the class that it rules..." (Quoted in Rees, 1984,p.13). Over time the organisational form for the promotion of IWCE gave way firstly to the Labour College Movement, to the Central Labour College and finally to the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). The Ruskin students, prior to 1907, were dissatisfied with the curriculum they were being offered and so organised a series of classes and public lectures which reflected their interests. Consequently, they were challenging the place and content of social harmony and they were offering it to the local population of Oxford. It was this challenge which prompted closer attention from Oxford University (Phillips and Putnam, 1980). The Ruskin strike was a response to a series of initiatives from within Oxford University which Ruskin students considered to be a threat. These initiatives would have linked "...Ruskin more closely with the University..."(Simon, Op.cit., p.320). In particular the University sought to exercise some influence on the content of the curriculum by the introduction of an examination (Simon, Ibid., pp.319-23).The students and the Principal, Dennis Hird, were not enthusiastic about the proposals. The Governors responded by effectively constraining the role of Dennis Hird before dismissing him. This was the immediate catalyst for the strike, which lasted one week (Simon, Ibid., pp.322-23). The college was then closed for two weeks and a number of the prominent student activists had their scholarships withdrawn (Simon, Ibid.,p.324). This set of circumstances intensified the sense of collective identity which embraced those who formed the Plebs League. They were to become the nucleus of a 'movement', a group of strong independently minded, garrulous young men, an embryonic organisation of heretics. These students, particularly those who formed the Plebs League, took their argument into the trade union and labour movement. Their campaign was for an independent 'Labour College' to be controlled by organised labour bodies (Simon, Ibid., p.323). Interestingly, the demand for a trade union college to be controlled by labour was not restricted to the 'left wing' movement but was also adopted as the policy of the TUC (Simon, Ibid., pp.319,331).

It is quite clear that the radical students at Ruskin College were challenging their tutors and the authorities at Oxford. The students shared a similar or common social backgrounds, some degree of ideological orientation and the fact that they were residential in, what they considered to be, an intimidating place (Phillips and Putnam, 1980, p.22). It may be noted in passing that over the past one hundred years a consistent feature of working class adult students, perhaps most adult students<sup>6</sup>, has been that their intellectual liberation has frequently been accompanied with a propensity to challenge (Weill, 1986. Ball, 2000, Appendices. The Observer, 1976). It also needs to be noted that the events at Oxford took place in the midst of, what appeared, to many socialist activists, as a major political liberation. The 1906 General Election represented a major step in the realignment of British politics. Independent Labour firmly established itself in Parliament as a demonstration of its influence across the country. For working class activists 'Independence' carried a totemic significance which is difficult to imagine one hundred years later. Add to this, that public discourse was heavily influenced by Marxist categories and analysis, and among Ruskin students, a significant proportion had some familiarity with the writings of Marx and were supplementing their formal studies with self organised study groups to further explore the work of Marx (Macintyre, 1980). Their demands for independent working class education were a reflection of the wider working class demands for independence translated into the Oxford context. The Oxford colleges represented privilege to many political activists from the working class, and it was a natural response for them to be hostile. This point was well made by Ramsey Macdonald in a letter to Mansbridge in December 1908: "Oxford is a poison...You cannot recreate Oxford by an infusion of working men...Oxford will assimilate them, not they Oxford" (Quoted by Jennings, 1987, p.25). In addition, a younger generation of Oxford academics were themselves critical of the university teaching of 'Economics' and the importance attached to Marshall's Principles (Harrison, R. 2000, pp.283-4).

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<sup>6</sup> An important characteristic of adult students is their 'experience' which has been explored in debate between Ann Hanson (1996) and Malcolm Knowles. The term 'experience' has previously been reviewed by Perry Anderson (1980, pp.25-31). Both of these discussions acknowledge the ambiguity of the term. For us we need only recognise that 'experience' is a term which captures engagement in social, industrial or occupational activity which enables the participant to compensate, with non-formal learning, for their disrupted or delayed engagement in formal learning.

Finally, it was Oxford that had attracted Mansbridge and the tradition of social harmony or conciliation in education, and led him to found the nascent WEA (Jennings, 1976. Roberts, 2003). A majority of the Ruskin College Governors were from the Oxford Colleges and were supporters of the 'conciliation' tradition (Simon, Op.cit., pp312, 319). The Oxford Report of 1908 brought these diverse elements together (Harrop,1987). It galvanised supporters of the two traditions into hardened positions. The supporters of conciliation pressed home their advantages of political and financial strength with the growth of the 'joint committee' (WEA and universities) work which was subsequently financed out of state funds. The supporters of IWCE decamped into their heartlands and spread their message of independence. In the midst of all this Ruskin College continued to provide residential adult education to working class students, which included many left wing radicals. Ruskin College was never absorbed into the Oxford Colleges as feared by the radicals but its teaching did evolve to embrace the tutorial method and it did become an important stepping stone for future Labour Movement leaders and for others to build lives in academia and the growing national and local states (Pollins, 1984).

### **Workers' Education and Oxford**

The founding of Ruskin Hall in 1899 and of the Workers Educational Association in 1903 represented the foundation of a secular adult education. Although the foundations of both bodies occurred from within the maelstrom of contemporary ideas and were, in some ways, typical of the age their metamorphosis implies a break with the values of middle class paternalism. Both organisations were founded in Oxford. This indicates some continuing involvement with the liberal and left leaning intelligentsia of Oxford University Colleges (Cole and Postgate,1961,p.483). Cambridge and Oxford had been the innovators of the Extension movement and the teaching of Economics was prominent in both universities. Economics teaching at Cambridge was under the guidance of A. Marshall , generally regarded as one of the leading economists. A growing dissatisfaction, from some academics and among some opinion formers, with his national status crystallized after 1890 with the

publication of his *Principles*. It was "...felt that little more needed to be done on the general theory of value ." (Harrison, R. 2000, p.283) By 1894 it was agreed, among leading university economists and opinion formers including Sydney Webb, that Oxford was the appropriate place to broaden the approach to the understanding of economic theory. The university teaching of Economics, "...had to have a character, which made the subject realistic and useful as well as intellectually elegant. The influence of foreign, chiefly German, economists had to be recognised, and the subject had to come to terms with the 'peaceful political revolution by which power had been transferred to the working classes', while thought had been more and more impressed by the doctrine of evolution. Economics must become part of any professional curriculum and no longer left as a Cinderella subject within universities." (Harrison, *Ibid.*, p.284) It was also among tutors of the Oxford University Extension Delegacy that dissatisfaction with the state of extension classes began to emerge. In their efforts to open up new relations with working class organisations they invited Albert Mansbridge to address a conference at Oxford in 1899 which ultimately led to the formation of the Workers Educational association in 1903 (Simon, *Op.cit.*, p.305). The invitation to Mansbridge to attend the 1899 conference developed out of existing relationships between Oxford Extension tutors and the Christian Economic Society, founded by Mansbridge, and which was focused on Oxford (Simon, *Ibid.*, pp.305-6).

The establishment of Ruskin Hall, and local Ruskin Halls in Manchester, Liverpool, Stockport and Birmingham, was intended to "...educate working men in order to achieve social change." (Pollins, 1984, p.9) The initiative was in many ways similar to previous initiatives. In this case two middle class philanthropists, who could be described as socialists, intended that the courses provided would prepare working men to play leading roles in industry and politics. As Ruskin College emerged from the chrysalis of Ruskin Hall, in 1902 when Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard left, a governing council was created which included leading figures from the university and from trades unions (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.312). The running costs of the college were met through voluntary contributions, private endowments contributed £265,000 by 1907 (Phillips and Putnam, 1980, p.22). Prompted by

the success of the new college and the electoral success of Labour candidates in the 1906 General Election the TUC issued an appeal for financial support: "...now that Labour is showing that it is determined to take its rightful position in the country, it more than ever needs the knowledge and training necessary to maintain that position..." (Quoted by Simon, Op.cit., p.319).

The WEA was founded, in 1903, as a federation of working class organisations, to promote social harmony through education. In essence it continued the system of university extension but was built around local branches (Jennings, 1987, p.12). The local branches took responsibility for their local educational activities (Jennings, *ibid.*, p.15. Harrison, J. Op.cit., pp.268-71. Simon, Op.cit., pp.303-12) by working with local universities or with the support of some national tutors such as R.H.Tawney (Jennings, Op.cit., p.15). Mansbridge was considerably aided, with the formation of the WEA, by his Oxford friends and by such national figures as Bishop Gore and Canon Samuel Barnett (Jennings, *ibid.*, pp.12-15). Speaking in the House of Lords, Gore pressed the case for financial support for workers education: "The Workers' Educational Association and the Ruskin College at Oxford are signs and evidences that among the working classes there is a very considerable body of people who desire to be students and are capable of being students. What we want is that the Universities should be so reorganised and that their endowments should be so used as that whatever there is of real intellectual aspiration and real desire for knowledge, should find its home and instruction in Oxford and Cambridge;..." (Harrop, 1987. Pp.119-124).

### **From corresponding societies to study groups.**

The role of face to face discussion and small group discussion had been a feature of the social origins of working class learning and political activity from before the 1830s (Johnson, 1979). This educational practice was all that was available but it was built out of the social experience of discussion which the participants were familiar with and it reinforced the democratic politics of their communities. The discussion group, a feature of the corresponding societies, became a feature of socialist activity, particularly the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, in the 1880s,

and it reinforced the democracy of local activity. This may have been because the experience of the Corresponding Societies was familiar to leading socialists but the tradition was mediated by the activity of Chartist, Owenite and Co-operative Sunday Schools between 1828-32, it also reflected their personal experiences and life histories (Simon, Op.cit., pp.31;48-49, Bertaux and Thompson, 1997)).

The various Owenite Socialist societies, Corresponding societies and Chartist organisations and campaigns were frequently built around an educational strategy. Supporters were introduced to new readings and it was through sharing this reading and then discussing it that they familiarised themselves with economic and political issues. "It was in these organised socialist groupings that serious and systematic study of economics and politics began – a revival of the tradition of independent working – class education which can be traced back to through the Chartist and Owenite Socialists to the Corresponding Societies in the 1790s." (Hobsbawm, 1964, p.373. Simon, Op.cit., p.31. Johnson, 1979, pp.98-100).

The London Corresponding Society was constituted in January 1792. It was reputed to have had a membership of 10,000, but this is thought to have been an exaggeration, and during 1792-94 it "...is fairly safe to assume..." a membership of over 3,000 (Cole and Postgate, 1963, p.152). The members paid a subscription of one penny a week, which for most of its membership, of working class artisans, carpenters, weavers, shoemakers and small traders, was a large sum. It was organised into "sections" of thirty members, though this did change, which were represented by delegates who were subject to recall. "Its chief activities were the printing of pamphlets and the holding of meetings and discussions..."(Cole and Postgate, Ibid, p.153). One popular reading was Tom Paine's, *The Rights of Man*. It was the practice of printing pamphlets and the organised discussion meetings which were to become a feature of socialist activity after 1900. The secretary of the London Society was Thomas Hardy, a working shoemaker (Cole and Postgate, Ibid.,p.160). The London Society was

suppressed by act of Parliament in 1797 and by this time other similar societies had been born and withered.

Discussion in its various forms has been a consistent thread in the development of IWCE. Tom Mann, for example, experienced the use of discussion groups in Socialist Sunday Schools; Joseph Arch was self-taught supported by his mother; and Robert Smillie was taught by his grandmother (Simon, *Ibid.*, pp.22-24). It was natural, for these and others, to reflect on their experience and apply it in their circumstances. Further, it was a natural expression of their social and political practice. The activist consolidated their understanding of their reading by sharing discussion with others, and preferably with those who had read the same newsheet, pamphlet or book. For example, in Bradford, in 1900, there were some 23 local Labour Clubs with some 300 members and the Lockwood Labour Club in Huddersfield held a weekly class to collectively read Blatchford's *Merrie England*, published in 1894 and selling 750,000 copies (Simon, *Ibid.*, p.37). Finally, the use of the discussion group was shaped by the political priority of the time. The leading figures of the working class movement were in the words of William Morris 'discontented with their material conditions' and were arguing for Socialism as something better (Simon, *Ibid.*, pp.24-5). William Morris argued, at the time, "I am sure it is right whatever the apparent consequences may be, to stir up the lower classes (damn the word) to demand a higher standard of life for themselves, not merely for themselves or for the sake of the material comfort it will bring, but for the good of the whole world and the regeneration of the conscience of man; and this stirring up is part of the necessary education which must in good truth go before the reconstruction of society." (Morris quoted by Simon, *Ibid.*, p.25). To achieve this class self interest it was therefore necessary that their proselytizing should be undertaken by Socialists. This involved a critique of liberal social and educational leadership and a positive adoption of socialist and working class leadership. The challenge required "...a body of able, high-minded, competent men, who should act as instructors of the masses and as their leaders during critical periods of the movement...a great proportion of these

instructors and organisers should be working men...” (Morris quoted by Simon, *Ibid.*, p.25. Thompson, 1977, p.379).

This body of able, high-minded and competent men found themselves at the core of the Socialist movement. They were initially attracted to the SDF, after 1895 they may have been attracted to the Socialist League, or to the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Hyndman’s SDF and the Socialist League were both explicitly Marxist organisations. They were organisations committed to using Marxism and its prescriptions to drive their political arguments. The ILP on the other hand may have included individual Marxists but also included non-Marxist Socialists. Discussion appears to have been a feature of their political life and it was a natural feature of their intellectual and political practice to be assertive. Central to the impact of this discussion was the presence of a thriving socialist press. The books published by Kerr and Co of Chicago were supplemented with local sheets, regional papers and journals (Simon, *Op.cit.*, p.297. Altenbaugh, 1990, pp.29-30. Rees, 1984, p.13). Speaking about his life as a member of Glasgow SDF, Tom Bell wrote “We read feverishly, discussed fiercely, and walked the streets, often after midnight, in an effort to sort out for ourselves the problems of man and the universe.” (Simon, *Op.cit.*, p.249) Discussion can lead to understanding, and to either, a confirmation and agreement of the common interpretation, or disputation. “According to T.A.Jackson, who was closely involved, ‘the whole movement of Independent Working – Class Education was a by – product of our *Impossibilist* revolt against Hyndman, and our drive for a more firmly based as well as a more militant Marxism.” (Quoted by Simon, *Ibid.*, p. 299 . Rees, 1984, p.13). The members of a small political organisation, such as a Marxist organisation in these circumstances, would share a rationale and a tight range of assumptions underpinned by either social or industrial similarities such as residential propinquity or the same workplace. This is evidenced by the literature around the study of communities in general but the specific case studies of the ‘little Moscows’ in particular (Macintyre, 1980,). It was probable that the members in a locality, for example, may ‘revolt’ together. “We ‘impossibilists’ “, claimed Jackson, “ran our own study classes religiously as part of the process of giving ourselves and others a more extended, as well as a more profound,



grasp of Marxist theory.” (Quoted by Simon, Op.cit.,p.300). Consequently, as argued by Fieldhouse, autodidacts, like John Burns, Tom Mann or Tommy Jackson, “...controlled both the process and the content of their education: ‘it remained their education, for they defined both the purpose and the boundaries of intellectual exploration’ “(Fieldhouse, 1987, p.36). These were not passive recipients of intellectual insights but independent minded, articulate workers actively contributing to the world in which they lived. Their learning was heavily combined with their democratic political practice.

Political organisation, social relationships and study complemented each other. The method relies on social intercourse, of the participants sharing the time and space with each other. This implies a degree of proximity at their place of work or where they lived. Tom Bell, for example, describes how workers would call at his house to follow up earlier discussions. “By dint of perseverance in discussion, and by means of pamphlets and books I won over a goodly number to my side. Workers would come to my house to get references for points raised in our discussions. Soon I was able to suggest we start a study circle. This we did, and a study circle was formed on Marxism and Industrial History ”(Bell, 1941,p.57). The study circle evolved out of existing discussions and existing relationships. A description of a typical study group is offered by Simon. The members of the group would, after a discussion, agree the text to be studied and the issues to be covered. At a subsequent meeting, each member would take turns to read from the text to other members of the group. At the next meeting there would be a discussion of the points raised. The group leader would summarise the discussion (Simon,Op.cit., p.300). It is suggested that a session ran for six months and that a disciplined and systematic coverage of readings would produce potential tutors for other classes (Simon, Ibid., Ibid,p.301). Following the founding of the Scottish Labour College, seventeen classes in economics and political subjects were arranged, in the winter of 1917-18, with 1500 students. The Glasgow Plebs League organised nineteen classes with some 1000 students. These classes were taught by John Maclean, who was an appointed and paid tutor, and William Gallacher and J.F.Armour (Simon, Ibid., p.339, footnote 1). In 1908-09 Maclean, at this time he was a schoolteacher, had worked with J.D.MacDougall to provide classes every week on economics and

industrial history and both of them provided introductions to dialectical materialism (Milton, 1973,p.43) This use of classes was commended by Tom Bell because it helped to produce tutors and so played a key part in the rapid expansion of the movement in contrast to the use of lectures, frequently used by John Maclean, but which did not produce future tutors (Simon, Op.cit., p.302, footnote 1).

### **Continued use of the approach**

The study group or study circle approach has continued as a feature of the education offered by Marxist, Socialist and Labour Movement organisations since the 1890s. It was extensively used by the Plebs League, the Central Labour College, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), the Communist Party<sup>7</sup>, by the Workers Educational Association(WEA) and the Workers Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC), by university adult education and most recently by the TUC Education Service. It is necessary to delineate a distinction in the method used by the Plebs League and the early Socialist organisations. It was a democratic practice of political organisations which strengthened their political practice. When used by educational organisations it may have been a democratic form of pedagogy but it was dissociated from any political practice. The appropriateness of the method for adult students has ensured its adoption for most organised adult learning (Barratt Brown,1969. Holford, 1994. Brookfield and Holst,2011). Jack Jones, a past General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, was a student in NCLC classes and WETUC classes, and he observed that at "... a labour college class dozens would be in attendance, from different trade unions. The tutors would normally open up on a short exposition and then we would discuss it. Often we would be invited to read a page or two of, say, *Value, Price and Profit*, or the *Outline of Economics*. A volunteer would do the reading...Others would comment on it, and perhaps ask a

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1930s the Communist Party introduced an educational strategy with three strands. There was intense training held in London over four weeks for the senior cadre drawn from across all regions. For senior district cadre there was locally provided training, and for members and supporters there was a network of study circles. The study circles were supported with a panel of trained volunteer tutors who were provided with printed guidance and learning resources (Rees, 1984, pp.58-60).

question which the tutor would try to explain, and then we would discuss it. The discussions were quite lively because we were all talking together like working men..." (Jones, 1984,p.97). He further explained that the methods used in the NCLC class and the WETUC class were essentially the same, except that the WETUC class "...had more university and professional people as tutors..." (Jones,Ibid.,p.98). The method was also a consistent feature of WEA/university tutorial classes as is recounted by a former working-class student who became a tutor and Professor of Adult Education. He explained that after 1927 the Board of Education, and its successors, recommended the use of the method by all funded tutorial classes. "Membership was limited and half the time of each class meeting had to be devoted to discussion; in other words the classes were discussion groups under the leadership of tutors academically trained in the subjects they were studying" (Styler, 1987, p.51).

The creation of WETUC, it is has been claimed, was the response by the WEA to the progress of the Central Labour College in establishing local educational activity, especially with members of trade unions (Simon, Op.cit, pp.338-9). Some Local Education Authorities in the West Ridings of Yorkshire, by 1919, were taking advantage of statutory provisions to fund classes provided by the WEA. This enabled the WEA to establish, with the aid of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, a Yorkshire Divisional Workers' Educational Committee. This was followed by a Miners' Lecture Scheme in 1922 (Harrison,J. 1961, p.273). The General Secretary of the ISTC was Arthur Pugh and in 1921 he became Chairman of WETUC. At the 1920 conference of WETUC Pugh had drawn the lesson from the establishment of the scheme in Yorkshire that the cost of education for adults was a serious issue and the trades unions could not afford the fees (Harrison,J. Ibi d., p.297 and footnote 1). This was a problem for the NCLC because it was excluded from LEA's funding and dependent upon on donations from trades unions (Harrison, Ibid., p.293 footnote 1).

The Plebs League and the NCLC had come into being, driven by the ideas of Marx, to build independent working class education. Following the formation of the Communist Party, in 1920, from the amalgamation of the small Socialist organisations, including many of the supporters of

Plebs and the Labour College movement, the Plebs were anxious to maintain their identity. The leadership of the Plebs claimed that it was not affiliated to a single political party and was independent from the Communist Party. "Our point of view in Plebs – Plebs League was purely educational, non-political body its aims to spread the ideals of class conscious education" (Plebs, 1922, p.388). This represented a significant claim. The CPGB was founded as the political organisation based on the ideas of Marx. During the years 1922 to 1924 this difference was explored by both sides (Miles, 1984, pp.105-7). The differences, brought out in discussion, resulted in a group of prominent Plebs supporters, including Mark Starr, Winfred and Frank Horrabin, Raymond Postgate and Ellen Wilkinson leaving the Communist Party and thereafter becoming a left opposition within the NCLC (Miles, *Ibid.*, pp.105-7). It has been suggested that the source of the difference, between the Plebs and the CPGB, was the emphasis which the Communist Party gave to political organisation. The Plebs League was driven by an understanding of Marx which had been developed before Lenin's *What is to be Done* had become familiar in Britain, and it sought to build a practice in which experience and learning informed each other. The CPGB had been formed after the establishment of Lenin and his ideas at the head of the Third International (Hinton, 1981, p.90). According to one researcher the "... Party's approach to education, based on its eager and unproblematic assimilation of the revolutionary politics of Leninism, represented a significant departure from the IWCE tradition as embodied in the Plebs League. The main point of departure was the Party's abandonment of the educational/propaganda emphasis which constituted the backbone of IWCE, in favour of a reliance on the efficacy of immediate political action ..." (Miles, *Op.cit.*, p.111). In practical terms, it has been suggested, this disagreement had less impact on the membership than on the national protagonists. During 1923 the NCLC attracted almost 12,000 students and in 1925 it attracted more than 30,000 students. Over the same period the total membership of the Communist Party never exceeded 6,000 and fewer than 800 attended educational classes. There were parts of the country, with a local Communist Party membership,

which did not offer Party organised educational classes because, in the judgement of the local Party leadership, the NCLC classes were adequate (Miles, *Ibid.*, p.111).

The debate between the Plebs and the CPGB also embraced some discussion about educational method. The Communist Party produced internal guidance for tutors on training members. The tutor, the guidance explained, "...must all the time be clear about where he is leading the discussion and see that it reaches the right conclusion..." (Miles, *Ibid.*, p.110, quote from 1927 CPGB publication). In contrast, the reminiscences of Jack Jones and other NCLC students point to NCLC classes being conducted with open ended discussion. Within the NCLC class it was understanding which was the principal aim and discussion was the means to reach that aim. The role of the tutor was to assist understanding and the conclusions were not pre-determined. It is also appropriate to note that The Oxford Report included guidance for tutors of adult classes, and with regard to the teaching of Economics it cautioned that the teacher "...who adopts this course must...be very sure that the criticism of Marx, implicit in the ordinary textbook, is equally explained...The question of what this textbook is to be arises. Marshall's is undoubtedly the most authoritative and sympathetic...the class...ought to be able to follow it if properly guided" (Harrop, 1987, pp.204-08).

Contained within a characteristically scathing critique of the Socialist organisations, Beatrice Webb recorded a commendation of their activity, in her diary for May 4, 1926. She was bemoaning the failure of the General Strike because it was driven by that 'pernicious doctrine of workers' control'. "On the whole, I think, it was a proletarian distemper which had to run its course and like other distempers it is well to have it over and done with at the cost of a lengthy convalescence." Whilst she was dismissive of the Socialist groupings she acknowledged a grudging recognition of their educational contribution: "...at the same time they accomplished a work which none of the parliamentary leaders had any possibility of beginning, and which was largely beyond the concern of the foremost Socialist intellectuals, elitist as they were almost to a man. They began a systematic

education of groups of workers for self – government, for political and economic power.”(Webb, 1965, pp.92-93).

### **Ebb and flow of IWCE.**

Even as the tradition of IWCE was being incubated it was provoking a strong response from critics within the Labour Movement and from political opponents. Formally the NCLC carried the banner for IWCE until its absorption by the TUC in 1964. This claim is presented with force by Millar in his history of the NCLC and is echoed by former NCLC organisers Joe Kenyon and by Sid Bidwell (Millar, 1979. Kenyon, 2003. Bidwell, 1963). In reality the tradition was at its liveliest and most potent in the years up to 1929. The subsequent decline of the tradition was a long march from those heady days in the 1920s aided and abetted by an astute opposition both within and without the workers movement. The Oxford conference of 1907 brought together a diverse social group including senior Oxford University managers and academics, at least one senior civil servant, prominent churchmen and representatives of working people. The reminiscences of one participant, at the conference, refer to a gathering of a cross section of the participants at a meeting in Mansbridge’s lodgings, indicate that across this social landscape there was a will to share in a common enterprise in favour of social harmony. He concluded “...that night at least it seemed a ‘centre of the intellectual aspirations of the whole community’ ” (Quoted by Fieldhouse, 1987, p.41).

The Oxford Report carried the message of social harmony into proposals for working class engagement in adult learning and it was from this quarter the first and most enduring opposition came. The proposals for social harmony were clearly outlined in the model curriculum (Harrop, 1987, p.203. Appendix V11); and, the proposals relating to Ruskin College and access to university by working class people (Harrop, *ibid.*, p.149-175). However there were two aspects of the Report with serious implications for the future of Independent Working Class Education. These related to the further development of University tutorial classes. The first was that there was a clear indication that state funds were available for workers education (Harrop, *ibid.*, p.191-2). One of the speakers at the

conference was Sir Robert Morant, Permanent Secretary to the Board of Education, who declared the Board was “...looking for guidance from such an Association as is represented here today to show us the way in which adult education can best be furthered. In particular we believe it is to small classes and solid earnest work that we can give increasingly of the golden stream” (Quoted by Jennings, 1987, p.18). This offer of grant aid, the ‘golden stream’, was essential for the further development of adult education work. Furthermore, it is likely that it was an offer carefully prepared by Mansbridge and Morant in prior discussions (Jennings, 1976,p.12). “Mansbridge’s adulation of university men and university values was reassuring, and Morant had recently brought both Mansbridge and David Shackleton (a moderate Labour MP and a keen supporter of the WEA and Ruskin Governor) onto the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education as a deliberate move to rebut charges that the Committee and the Board were hostile to working-class aspirations” (Jennings,1987, p.18). The second aspect of the Report was that there were proposals for engaging the representatives of workers to be involved in the organisation and management of university education for workers (Harrop, Op.cit.,p.148, Para.85 ). The purpose, according to Fieldhouse, of having working class representation on the organising and managing bodies was to educate them. Through their participation they would learn to trust ‘Oxford’ and encourage their members to share this trust (Fieldhouse, 1987, p.43). This reference to method mirrors an observation by William Morris in 1895 arguing that engagement in a “...life of continual compromise...”leads workers representatives away from Socialism (Thompson, 1977, p.382). In this way the custodians of social harmony set in motion elements that would have a profound influence on the ideology of adult education. Not only was social harmony an integral feature of WEA approach to education it became an important element, through the Fabian conduit, of Labourist philosophy. The central claim of this argument is that social institutions and organisations which are constructed under the influence of a dominant and hegemonic ideology become transmitters of that ideology and engagement in their daily practice will influence participants. Thus Harrison recounts the large number of workers and

Labour representatives who passed through WEA classes in Yorkshire from 1945 to 1960 (Harrison, 1961).

This advantage, which was inherited by the WEA and universities, was developed into a second challenge. Almost as soon as the Oxford conference had ended they embarked on a campaign to describe the work of IWCE as propaganda and in contrast the work of universities and the WEA as 'liberal'. The "...WEA and the tutorial class movement grew from strength to strength, providing an education that was broadly 'liberal', sometimes radical, sometimes pluralist, but essentially orthodox and anti-Marxist in tenor " (Fieldhouse, 1987, p.45). The case, which Fieldhouse makes, is that after 1890, successive governments, but particularly the Liberal Government, followed a clearly established strategy of incorporating the representatives of labour in constitutional politics. This political strategy, which included relief for the unemployed, the state pension and labour exchanges also included grant aid for tutorial classes and participation by Labour politicians and trade union representatives in the state machinery, such as committees and public bodies (Fieldhouse, 1987, p.40). For this to be successful, it was necessary to persuade workers that IWCE was partial and sectional (propaganda) and that the alternative was neutral and 'objective'. Writing in the University Extension Journal, in 1903, Mansbridge emphasised this 'liberal' nature of education as a process "...through higher knowledge to higher works and higher pleasures..." (Harrison, J. Op.cit., 1961, pp.261-3). Writing about the early years of the Leeds branch of the WEA Harrison contrasts the programmes of the Local education Authority which were vocational further education, the short courses offered by the university which were academically inaccessible, with the programmes of the NCLC, which he claimed "...confused education with left-wing propaganda..." . It was the "...historic role of the WEA..." to provide education for the working class (Harrison, Ibid., p.280).

Some seventeen years after the publication of the Oxford report the then Conservative President of the Board of Education underlined the success of the strategy in the following extract from a letter:



“In adult education there is a continual struggle going on between the Universities and those bodies, like the Workers’ Educational Association, who work with the Universities, on the one hand, and the Communists or semi-Communist Labour Colleges on the other hand. Hitherto the Workers’ Educational Association and the University Extension people have been able to make headway against these undesirable propagandists because, largely owing to Government assistance, they can offer better facilities. On the whole, too, I think the education they do offer is extraordinarily useful...If we force the WEA and the Universities to cut down their work we shall not choke off the demand for local classes which is extraordinarily strong in all parts of the country, but we shall open a wide door to the Labour College and I believe that the result will be deplorable. In fact my own view is that £100,000 spent annually on this kind of work, properly controlled, would be about the best police expenditure we could indulge in “ (Quoted by Fieldhouse, 1987, pp.45-6. Jennings, 1979, pp.36-39).

In fact, the reference to ‘properly controlled’ was a reference to the conditions attached to the receipt of grant aid. This was principally in the designation of an organisation as a ‘Responsible Body’ in the Adult Education Regulations of 1924. A Responsible Body was competent to receive grant aid but was required to act responsibly in the appointing of teachers, approving syllabuses and generally ensure efficient instruction in their educational work (Harrison,J. Ibid., p.293 footnote 1).

Increasingly after 1925 these conditions were used to great effect. Government appointed inspectors (HMI’s) were employed by inspecting the competence and quality of the teaching and the curriculum being used (Fieldhouse, pp.153-172). The purpose which drove this vigilance was suspicions about the political independence of tutors teaching courses funded out of the public purse (Fieldhouse, Ibid., pp.156-7). Fieldhouse refers to several examples in which the professional integrity of tutors was challenged and subject to examination (Fieldhouse,Ibid., pp.160-162). There have been more recent examples. Following an inspection at The Northern College in 1982, it had received its first students in 1978, the staff of the college published a report of their own to respond to the criticisms carried in the HMI Report (Barratt Brown, 2004,pp.61-64). Finally, following critical

questions by right wing Tory MPs, in Parliament about the TUC programme of courses, during 1991-92, HMI's were required to undertake investigations and their subsequent report was the basis for changing the conditions associated with the provision of public funds for trade union education (Holford, 1994, pp.222,226,234-236).

A third challenge to the ideology of IWCE came from within in the form of its uncritical attitudes to Marxist literature (Hinton, 1981). The Ruskin founders of the Plebs and their supporters sought to be self sufficient and self dependent, and this was a reflection of the Victorian respect for intellectual self-improvement. The founders of IWCE came to be a generation of autodidacts who achieved their learning outside of any established institutions of learning. The weakness of the autodidacts was a consequence of their most admirable quality. They had achieved their liberation and acquired their intellectual tools from the world around them but they also had to devise their instructions for use. In the words of James Hinton: "The Achilles heel of the autodidact tradition was its positivist appetite for facts...the limitation of a Marxism which was frequently mechanical..." (Hinton, 1981, p.89). To illustrate, we can refer to the Forward, by John S. Clarke, to *Direct Action: An outline of workshop and social organisation* (W. Gallacher and JR Campbell, 1972). "Since the advent of Marx and Engels, ... humanity, or that part of humanity which alone counts-the working class-has developed an ideology incomparable with any hitherto known. In one grand mental sweep we see man breaking a bloody trail from Paleolithic days unto the present time, and in Tennyson's words, 'slowly moving upward working out the beast' ". This example is emblematic of the evolved style in which the working class is lauded, there is a reverential attitude to the works of Marx and Engels and a polymath range of intellectual curiosity draws on Tennyson and classical history. The writings of Marx and Engels were accepted as recipes or prescriptions which could not be improved or adjusted in response to changing circumstances. The Plebs did not take Marxism as a toolbox which could be employed to address the problems they faced. These founders of a vibrant Socialism and of Independent Working Class Education appear to have uncritically adopted a bureaucratic division between intellectual and agitational work. It is a fascinating paradox how a group of independently

minded and argumentative young men capable of standing up to the challenges of Liberal England's finest minds at Oxford University and of disagreeing with Hyndman could become uncritical followers of Socialist icons (Macintyre, 1980. Rees, 1984). Within a year of decamping from Ruskin College the Plebs had established in London, the Central Labour College and at about the same time had attracted some support from educated and literate 'outsiders'. These were professionals and included Raymond Postgate, Maurice Dobb, W and J.F. Horrabin and Eden and Cedar Paul (Phillips and Putnam, 1980, p.23). This group was expanded by the early 1920s by the addition of J.T. Walton Newbould, Morgan Phillips-Price, and Ellen Wilkinson. (Miles, 1984, p.105). The Plebs continued to be dominated by trade union activists but the recruitment of intellectuals and professionals experienced in building and presenting arguments resulted in the intellectuals taking over much of the organisations writing. This was, however, only a visible sign of deeper changes. The metamorphosis of the Plebs from the 'organisation of heretics' of the Ruskin students to a national and centrally organised provider of radical education was a profound change.

Over the longer term, 1929 to 1965, the daily detail of finding the funds to continue the NCLC and the students to teach were to be major problems. The original Plebs relied on local branches of trade unions and of political organisations. The fourth challenge evolved with the metamorphosis into the NCLC and an increased dependence on national trade union funds. Central trade union support led to central trade union control and a decline in the influence of local activists (Phillips and Putnam, 1980., pp.32-34). In the process the tradition of local democracy became marginalised. However, the fifth serious problem which challenged IWCE was the formation of the Communist Party. With the formation of the Communist Party there became two voices representing authentic Marxism. It became increasingly problematic for the representatives of IWCE to build support. This was exacerbated after the splits in the International communist Movement and the formation of the Left Opposition (Phillips and Putnam, *Ibid.*, p.38). This became a particular problem for the NCLC because a number of prominent NCLC organisers were actively engaged in the Left Opposition and were openly critical of the political line of the CPGB (McIlroy, 1992, pp.188-190). To this was added, after

the 1920s, the gradually receding tide of revolutionary opportunity. It is very difficult for the ordinary worker, with little leisure time, to sustain a high level of political orientation for many months let alone for many years. So the volunteer cadre of the Plebs League/NCLC which did not join the Communist Party migrated to the fringes of activity. The organisation of IWCE although separate from the Communist Party inhabited part of the same historical and political space, and shared a common long decline. This relationship eventually acted negatively on the NCLC and unleashed a dynamic driving the NCLC from Marxism (Miles, Op.cit., p.104).

The final serious problem for IWCE, which also offers evidence of its success, lies in the important social and educational changes that transformed British society. In 1920 the school leaving age was raised to 14, in 1944 the Education Act made secondary education available for all (Simon, 1965, p.359-60. McIlroy, 1992, pp.174-5). By the 1970s there was some evidence of increasing working class participation in Higher Education even though this was also the subject of political disagreement (Harrop, 1987. Styler, 1987). As the children of workers increased their participation in Primary, Secondary and to some extent of Higher Education the demands for IWCE have understandably died (McIlroy, 1992, p.234). Under the combined impact of these challenges IWCE and the organisations which nurtured and carried it withered and were lost to the margins of working class life. However, there are a number of successes, wholly or partially, attributable to IWCE. Most notable of these has been the emergence of a secular education independent from vested interests. It was following the endeavours and demands of autodidacts that education for the self was achieved. Those pioneers were also the pioneers of learning for its own sake (Rowbotham, 1981, p.92. Rees, 1984, p.15). It was also these pioneers who in their campaigns for education for all successfully persuaded the TUC to adopt, in 1900, a comprehensive statement which included the following clause: "That the elementary and higher education of the people shall be at the public expense, free, unsectarian, and under the management of the elected representatives of the people" (Simon, 1965, p.199).

## Independence

Establishing IWCE was a political act because, it was an act of opposition, to assert independence. The political leaders of the state, fearful of the new working class, attempted to assuage the threat both by political repression and 'social harmony'. The repression included the Combination Acts (1799-1800), the Peterloo Massacre and Six Acts (1817-19), the prosecution of the London gas stokers (1872), and the Trade Union Acts of 1871 and 1875 which led to the Taff Vale Judgement (1901). Repression and social harmony were not alternatives but complemented each other. In the case of Ruskin College, it was the attempts by Liberal opinion to engage working class adults into 'social harmony' education that elicited the strike and the subsequent formation of Plebs. The response of the Ruskin students to the paternalist overtures from Liberal conciliators carried elements from a long history of working class refusal. The transitional formation of the working class included refusal in its genes with origins in the experience of Luddism (Thompson, 1963,p.601). The two elements complemented each other; the awareness of self, as a class, evolved out of the act of refusal and the act of refusal confirmed the evolving awareness of class.

The strike by Ruskin students and the emergence of IWCE/Plebs became a political act because it was a response to a political initiative. The initiative, of incorporating labour in to the activity of the liberal democratic state, was itself a strand in a political strategy and so the response would be political. This was subsequently confirmed by the provision of the 'golden stream' to the WEA. The student rebels were also asserting their independence from the uncritical willingness of the Fabian strand in the Labour Movement to work within Victorian bourgeois hegemony. This view is developed by Altenbaugh, who illuminates his case with a quote from Henry de Man: "When labor strikes, it says to its master: I shall no longer work at your command. When it votes for a party of its own, it says: I shall no longer vote at your command. When it creates its own classes and colleges, it says: I shall no longer think at your command. Labor's challenge to education is the most fundamental of the three." (Altenbaugh,1990,p.19). The claim offered here is for independence

from a prevailing or dominant view. This was the view being advanced by the Secretary of the Bristol Labour League in 1886, in defence of their decision to present candidates, independent of the existing Board membership for the election of school boards: "No sir, there is not a ghost of a chance of our withdrawing our man. He is going in, and let me tell you as emphatically as I can that from this day forward the working men of Bristol will have to be consulted on these matters...We are determined that a principle shall be planted on the Board which will strongly protest against the domination of the so-called upper classes over the working class – a protest against that which has brought the workers to the fearful state in which we today find them." (Simon, 1965, p.148).

This view of independence, when applied to education, also embraces the claim that education plays an important role in the ideological management of society. On the one hand this may simply be that general education of all citizens, because it provides a common introduction to explanations about society and encourages common expectations, acts to socialise individuals. On the other hand it could be seen to encourage and develop a rationale for the values, priorities and the way a society works. This leads to a shared set of intellectual explanations (Berger,1966). Marx described this as 'ideology' because the shared values and explanations were not based on the essence of society but were 'false' representations. "In other words, the form is deceptive. It induces false impressions, erroneous thinking: namely, the impression of fixity, confusion between the natural (immobile) thing, and the social thing (abstract, hence formed historically). And it carries the whole of society with it in a very special process: reification " ( Lefebvre,1968, p.48). Marx identified and mobilised this insight with the example of the way that 'things' become 'commodities' infused with an exchange value (Marx, 1961, p.47. Marx, 1904, pp.19-56). He then took the analysis into the way that the ideology of individualism mobilised the act of production and exchange into a rationale for society masking the formal social relationships on which it was based (Marx, 1904.pp.267-74. Lefebvre, Op.cit., pp.112) .

A perceptive observer of the power implicit in ordered social relationships was Gramsci and one of the earliest commentaries on the ideas of Gramsci was provided by G.A. Williams (Williams, 1960). In this, Williams sought to identify and understand the complex formation of political and cultural leadership. By hegemony, Williams writes, "... Gramsci seems to mean a socio-political situation, in his terminology a 'moment', in which the philosophy and practice of a society fuse or are in equilibrium; an order in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, ... An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied." (Williams, op.cit. p.587) This reference suggests that behaviour within a society may be influenced in both its content and its appearance by a dominant group. This understanding was developed further by Raymond Williams when he argued that hegemony was not partial or sectoral but was "...lived at such a depth, which saturates society..." (Williams, R, 1973, p.8). This line of argument is proposing that some ideas are accepted and adopted into the activity and explanations of all society, and as G. Williams, explains this is not 'necessarily conscious' (Williams, 1960, Op.cit.). Although Gramsci had employed the idea to great effect he was employing his skill as an archaeologist of ideas and employing the ideas to understand the circumstances he confronted. The ideas came originally from Marx and were part of a typically poignant passage in '*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*'. Marx was describing the way that some ideas are the dominant ideas because they offer "...the universal light with which all other colours are tinged and are modified through its peculiarity. It is a special ether which determines the specific gravity of everything that appears within it" (Marx, 1904, p.302)<sup>8</sup>.

Access to education by the British working class followed that of the aristocracy and of the industrial and commercial middle classes. Those social layers used their wealth and leisure time to appreciate the value of education. Writing and reading offered a gateway into intellectual discoveries and into the pleasures of literary and artistic forms. They also underpinned their social and political domination. Within industrial or complex societies, the recording of history or the building of

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<sup>8</sup> This was an American edition with an American spelling of 'color'.

political argument are built on the literacy of those who exercise power. It was when the 'ruling classes' recognised that the developing economy and society was creating a demand for universal education that they began to accede to the growing demands from within the working class. It was this context which framed the demand for 'independent working class education'. On the one hand the extension of education to the working class came from a utilitarian impulse. There were those who wished to share the benefits of education, principally driven by their faith or ambitions of social welfare. These impulses can be found in the foundations of the Mechanics Institutes the Settlements and University Extension (Simon, 1965, pp.78-92). On the other hand when the demand came from within the working class it was frequently associated with the demands for equality or social and political reform (Simon, Ibid., pp.122-164). However, the greatest stimulus came when industrial and economic demands required a different quality of labour (Simon, Ibid, pp.166-67). The early expansion of white collar labour was made possible with educated labour from Germany (Simon, Ibid.). This brought the importance of education to the attention of industrialists. It was reinforced when British industrialists observed that the superior German<sup>9</sup> education system was enabling German industry to challenge British exports in overseas markets (Simon,Ibid.,p165). These quite separate impulses eventually coalesced into the educational reforms of 1902, which had been taking shape over the previous thirty years. The demand for Independent Working Class Education represented an alternative and divergent development but nevertheless one that was contingent on the principal development.

## **Conclusion**

The failure to establish an independent educational practice which could be sustained can be seen as evidence of the failure to establish an indigenous independent intellectual tradition. This claim rests on the perceptive observation of Maurice Dobb, writing in 1927

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<sup>9</sup> It is a matter of considerable irony that Imperialist competition with Germany should have played its part in the nineteenth century development of demands for education and skill by British workers and that in 2012 the German economy is regarded as the strongest national economy in Europe.



on the need for the development of a 'creative school of British Marxism' which was 'organically part of the active working-class movement' (Quoted by Macintyre, 1980, p.112). The struggle for Socialism and the struggles to establish or to defend independent adult education with working class engagement and purposes are integrally fused. They have a common rationale and are mutually reinforcing. This failure can be traced through the evolved bureaucratic and centralising practice of the Plebs/NCLC, and indeed through the subsequent history of relationships between working class political activity and intellectuals, of the workers expecting the academics and professionals to be responsible for the intellectual roles. This is not merely a division of labour. It is a political error which leads from the division of labour to the bureaucratisation of the organisation. It places insufficient emphasis on the full participation of all members and placidly assumes that leadership is an intellectual role and not a political role.

Writing some thirteen years after the commencement of the Thatcher project, which coincides with the origins of neo-liberalism, and incidentally sixty-five years after the observation by Dobb, Brian Simon proclaimed: "The threat to exterminate socialism as a political possibility has direct reference to adult working-class education..." (Simon, 1992, p.11). This judgement contains a number of elements. There is a clear reaffirmation of his argument that the struggles for socialism and for adult working class education were almost indistinguishable. At the very least they informed each other. In addition, he indicates his distance from a determinist view of the inexorable progress of educational advances. Socialism and working class education need to be worked for and each achievement vigilantly defended.

It is undoubtedly the case that beginning in 1902 and extending up to 1979 the provision of education became universal. In addition to universal primary and secondary education there were important developments in the direction of nursery and pre-school provision and a diverse range of

post-compulsory, further and Higher Education, opportunities. This encouraged some educational researchers and writers to speculate that progress was inexorable (see Harrison, J. 1961). It has also been suggested that Brian Simon adopted a similar tone in some of his writings (1965). This is somewhat contradicted by his judgement that progress was frequently subverted by bureaucratic means (Simon, 1965, p.358). Most certainly there is no indication of inevitability in *The Search for Enlightenment* (1992).

This paper has sought to focus attention on the emergence and role IWCE. The evidence assembled supports the claim that IWCE was built on foundations established by working class cultural independence. The IWCE tradition was also established during the period of intense political debate about the nature of socialism which saw the rise and later the decline of the 'shop stewards movement' and ultimately the formation of the Communist Party. This was linked to its purpose, as seen by its leading participants, that IWCE was central to them achieving their political aims. The key vehicle for IWCE was Plebs as defined by the ambassadors of the Ruskin strike and their distinguishing method was the study group or study circle as it evolved within political organisations of the left. This education was arranged by political organisations, and practice and learning were interrelated and informed each other. Furthermore, most of the education had a clear political purpose. There was some provision of learning to support activists to read and write but even with this learning its purpose was to help activists to engage with political discourse and activity. The cohering of IWCE was a condition of independent political organisation. Not only did they stimulate each other they induced their middle class opponents and the state to work to undermine their influence. For the greater part of the past hundred years the British state has funded adult education. Initially, at least, the 'golden stream' served an overt political purpose. Over recent years although funds continue to be made available for forms of vocational adult learning there is now no state funding for learning which supports political knowledge or understanding. This change lends support to the claim that the decline of IWCE as a political movement has reflected the position of socialist argument within working class politics. It is no longer necessary for the British state to build

social harmony, because the habits of social harmony extend throughout British society and are comprehensively represented by the Labour Party.

Evidence of IWCE, the study circle or discussion group, is reflected in the practice of post 1960s adult learning. As a first condition, the study circle takes as its starting point, the willingness of participants to engage in discussion as an educational act. To this is added the agreement that discussion should be about an agreed issue or topic. In the examples given attention was on selections from printed literature but it could have been on a verbal presentation. The printed literature provides a common focus for the discussion and allows the participants to read this in advance and to prepare their thoughts. So that the verbal exchanges, in a discussion, are an expression of deeper thoughts and evidence of more profound intellectual activity. This is but one aspect of the method as an educational method. The activity is augmented by agreeing that the discussion would be managed by someone acting as a tutor. This role manages the participation of members and ensures some degree of shared engagement in an orderly way. It also ensures that there is some consistency of interpretation and perhaps of understanding, but this is not the same as reaching the 'right' conclusion. The process is supported by the tutor, although trained, being drawn from the ranks of the students or of having their confidence because of sharing the student's frame of reference. Finally, from the examples given there is evidence that the method supported the development of activists and of new tutors. For the members of Marxist and socialist organisations, from the ILP/SDF to the formally educational bodies such as NCLC/WEA, discussion has been at the core of their pedagogic practice. It has facilitated the education of many thousands of working people. As Beatrice Webb confirmed, modern democracy was aided by the educational preparation of the many volunteers who accepted political and industrial office for the Labour Movement. There are challenges, for discursive methods, from microchip technology and audio-visual aids which can support a new generation of autodidacts. But the success of the study circle and of discussion could be successfully employed in a modern setting.

The preparedness of the Plebs to engage in a dispute with Liberal England's ideologues remains a rare example of working class independence. This response was taken at a time when the ideas and influence of the Fabian leadership were percolating from Hampstead (Harrison,R. 2000, p.57) to the leadership of the 'new' Labour Party, and provides an interesting paradox considering the lukewarm attitude, of the Webbs, to the formation of a 'labour party'. However, over the longer term the Fabians have been more successful than the Plebs with their influence over working class political and educational activity. The Fabian view of the state and of political activity has become part of the settled orthodoxy of the Labour party and is a significant feature of the challenge which today faces those who are prepared to pick up the challenge of Independent Working Class Education.

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