

The Imaginary Institution of Adult Education: A Reassessment of the Field's Collective Identity

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Abstract: This paper draws upon central concepts from the psychoanalytic tradition, and the work of several theorists working in that tradition—Copjec, Lacan, Laclau & Mouffe, Lefort, and Zizek—to explain the identity crisis confronting the institution of adult education and outline a potential course of action for adult educators.

Introduction

Every society up to now has attempted to give an answer to a few fundamental questions: Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking? Society must define its "identity," its articulation, the world, its relations to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires. Without the "answer" to these "questions," without these "definitions," there can be no human world, no society, no culture—for everything would be an undifferentiated chaos. The role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither "reality," nor "rationality" can provide.

(Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 146–147)

Its roots firmly entrenched in the Western empirical-analytic tradition, the institution of adult education, from its very inception, has looked to the "real" and the "rational" to "define its 'identity,' its articulation, the world, its relations to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires."¹ Only of late has it become apparent that "obviously, neither 'reality,' nor 'rationality' can provide" such answers. In spheres long the privileged domain of the orthodoxy—adult education journals and conferences—the institution's "answers" have been subjected to increasing scrutiny by an increasingly vocal lobby of educators committed to "alternative knowledge forms" (Welton, 1991, p. 26).

Inspired by the successes of feminist initiatives in other arenas, the alternative lobby has struggled unremittingly to strip the establishment's "answers" of their essentialist guise and reveal the exclusionary interests at play behind their universalist gloss. But having shattered the ideal image that has long unified the field, the alternative lobby, no longer united by a common cause, is dissipating into a plethora of special interest groups engaged in various forms of identity politics. As a result, the institution of adult education, stripped of its defining characteristics, is undergoing an identity crisis, a crisis that some fear threatens the very being of the field. How is this strange turn of events to be understood? What sort of response does this situation demand of adult educators? This paper draws upon central concepts from the psychoanalytic tradition, and the work of several theorists working in that tradition—Copjec, Lacan, Laclau & Mouffe, Lefort, and Zizek—to explore this perplexing problem and outline a potential course of action for adult educators.

The Nature of Identity

What is it that makes a "Canadian" distinctly different from an "American"? While members of both collectivities will protest and defend their "differences," just how they are different is often a mystery to Canadians and Americans alike. The same is true for members of other nations. In fact, the concepts "nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse" (Anderson, 1991, p. 3). Such concepts, Anderson contends, are, in fact, "cultural artefacts of a particular kind";

¹ See Briton and Plumb (1993) for one account of the factors that contributed to the establishment of an adult education orthodoxy.

consequently, "to understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being," and "in what ways their meanings have changed over time" (p. 4). Descriptors such as "nation" and "adult education," then, refer not to a set of objective or *real* features but *imaginary* relations. Why? Because adult educators, not unlike "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6).

However, just as the members of most nations consider themselves part of *real*, rather than *imaginary* communities, so too do adult educators. This manifests itself in terms of a desire for a concrete "identity," for a constitutive "Law," for a clearly defined object of study and a distinct body of knowledge, evidenced in statements such as: "there is an urgent need for the development of a body of research and a theory unique to adult education" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 25). It is this perceived desire or "lack" that the institution of adult education coalesces around, taking the form a collective subject whose very being depends upon the knowledge of its own origins being hidden from itself. As with the individual subject of psychoanalysis, this collective subject exists neither prior to nor apart from its desire and is comprised of two dimensions that correspond to the *conscious* and *unconscious* aspects of the individual. Consequently, it will be useful to say a little about how the psychoanalytic tradition arrived at and explains its the notion of the decentred subject.

The Subject of Psychoanalysis

Jacques Lacan, the *enfant terrible* of psychoanalysis, traces the emergence of the modern subject—the self-conscious monad at the very centre of the human being, the autonomous agent at the heart of the Western Humanist tradition that serves as the unshakable foundation for Truth—to 17th Century Europe, identifying its first appearance in the work of René Descartes. It was Descartes who recognized in his own process of thinking an awareness of himself, his self-consciousness. This is act involves, "over and above the registration and perception of sensations, an *apperception*: an act of attributing perception to an underlying perceiver" (Grosz, 1990, p. 35, emphasis added). Hence Descartes' dictum: *Cogito ergo sum*; I think, therefore, I am. It was this revelation that led Descartes to declare consciousness and subjectivity *coterminous*. It is exactly this notion of the unitary, centred subject that Freud's discovery of the unconscious challenges. It is Lacan, however, who rephrases the question first asked by Freud in a way that is more in keeping with theories of language that postdate Freud's own work: "Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier [in Lacanese, "the enunciated subject"] concentric or eccentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified ["the subject of enunciation"]?" (Lacan, 1977, p. 165). The meaning Lacan attributes to these terms will be discussed below.

Lacan's answer, of course, is *eccentric* or "decentred," since he posits a subject comprised of more than one centre. His claim is that the subject occupies different places or locations: one the centre of conscious discourse—of "signifiers"—the other of unconscious discourse governed by "signifying mechanisms" that shape the "signified" and can, therefore, be designated legitimately as thought. It is Lacan's contention that this bipolarity demands a reformulation of Descartes' *Cogito*: "I think [on an unconscious level, at the level of the "signified"] where I am not [that is, on a conscious level, at the level of the "signifier"], therefore I am where I do not think" (Lacan, 1977, p. 166). What Descartes fails to recognize, according to Lacan, is that the concept, "subject," is comprised of *two* elements, elements that correspond to Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) "signifier" and "signified—to the word used to represent or signify a thought, "apple," for instance, and the thought object "🍏" itself. The "subject of the signifier" is the subject of consciousness—that which is enunciated—the "subject of the signified" is the subject of the unconscious—that which

structures enunciation. This bifurcation, Lacan contends, is the condition for the possibility of the subject coming into being, for its ability to “unknowingly” represent its own desire to itself. As Slavoj Žižek (1991, p. 68) notes: “the Lacanian notion of the imaginary [enunciated] self... exists only on the basis of the misrecognition of its own conditions; it is the effect of this misrecognition.” It is not, however, the supposed inability of this self to reflect that Lacan focusses on, “on its being the plaything of inaccessible unconscious forces; his point is that the subject can pay for such reflection with the loss of his [or her] ontological consistency.”

Misunderstandings of Lacan’s position are legend, and some suggest quite explicable.² It is a failure to grasp his distinction between the two subject positions—between “the enunciated subject” and “the subject of enunciation”—that is often the source of much confusion, however. It is useful to bear in mind, therefore, that if the unconscious is the locus of thought—the subject of enunciation—and the conscious subject, or imaginary ego, is the locus of language—the enunciated subject—an irremediable gap between what is *meant* and what is *said* is apparent. The result, according to Lacan, is that “the implications of meaning infinitely exceed the signs manipulated by the individual...; as far as signs are concerned, man is always mobilizing many more of them than he knows” (Lacan, in Felman, 1987, p. 77).

The unconscious, the subject of enunciation, is a site of unmeant knowledge that escapes intentionality and meaning, appearing to the conscious subject only in the form of verbal slips and dream images—it is a *speaking* knowledge that is denied to the *speaker’s* knowledge. The unconscious “is knowledge that can’t tolerate one’s knowing that one knows,” and “analysis appears on the scene to announce that there is knowledge that does not know itself, knowledge that is supported by the signifier as such” (in Felman, 1987, p. 77). The point that should not be missed here is that *the very condition for the possibility* of conscious knowledge is the *active* repression of some other knowledge on an unconscious level.³ Ignorance is not the *absence* of knowledge but the *negative* condition for the possibility of any *positive* knowledge: the gap between knowing and not knowing, consequently, can never be closed. As Felman (1987) notes:

there can be no such thing as absolute knowledge: absolute knowledge is knowledge that has exhausted its own articulation, but articulated knowledge is by definition what cannot exhaust its own self-knowledge. For knowledge to be spoken, linguistically articulated, it would constitutively have to be supported by the ignorance carried by language, the ignorance of the *excess of signs* that of necessity its language—its articulation—“mobilizes.” (Felman, 1987, pp. 77–78)

The Collective Subject

If we now return to the collective subject that emerges with the institution of adult education, we see that it is in repressing its knowledge of its origins in one place that this

² Metz (1982, p. 223), for instance, suggests that Lacan’s “*Ecrits* make no claim to didactic clarity, at least in the ordinary sense (because I think they possess another kind of clarity, profoundly didactic in its own way: blindingly so, to the point that the reader represses it and makes enormous efforts not to understand).”

³ It is for this reason that Foucault’s notion of the subject, a notion embraced by some members of the alternative lobby to undermine the orthodoxy, must be dismissed as flawed. According to Foucault—most clearly in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*—the subject is totally determined by the apparatuses of Power. That is, the only knowledge the subject has is that which the apparatus instills in her or him. This overlooks the fact that the subject can have knowledge *only* on condition that some other knowledge—the conditions for the possibility of its existence—remains hidden in the subject. The subject, then, can never be totally determined by, transparent to, the apparatuses of Power, as is confirmed by the ongoing resistance of subjects to the System, despite the best efforts of the mechanisms of Power to quell such efforts. See Copjec (1989) for a closer analysis of this issue.

collective subject is able to represent to itself in another the object of its desire: an objective set of defining features. But what are these two levels that correspond to the individual subject's conscious and unconscious dimensions? The first, according to Claude Lefort, is the "Social": it corresponds to the conscious subject, the subject of the signifier, the enunciated subject, the imaginary ego. The second is the "Political": it corresponds to the unconscious subject, the subject of enunciation, the subject of the signified, the ego ideal. The institution of adult education entails, then, the coming into being of a split collective subject that must repress all knowledge of its origins in its Social dimension, in order that its other dimension—the Political—may appear there as the representation/ideal image of its own desire: an objective set of defining features—the Law. The Lacanian notion of Law at play here is enabling, rather than prohibitory, being "conceived as an agency of 'disalienation' and 'liberation': it opens up our access to desire by enabling us to disengage ourselves from the rule of the Other's whim" (Zizek, 1994, p. 265). Under the Law, the emergence of "adult education" as a Law-governed practice allows adult educators to distinguish themselves from the "Other," to identify with one another and see themselves as distinct from all other fields of educational endeavour.

However, for those who comprise the institution's Social dimension—"adult educators"—to be able to recognize themselves in its Political representation/ideal image—"adult education"—this ideal signifier must appear greater than and different from those signifiers whose *identity* it must sustain—as a Law. While adult educators identify with this ideal image in many different ways—through signifiers such as "essentialism," "perennialism," "progressivism," "reconstructionism," "existentialism," "liberal education," "humanistic education," "behaviorism," "radicalism," "philosophical analysis," etc. (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 43)—the term/image "adult education" must serve to sustain the identity of this wide range of practices above and beyond all their variations. This raises the question of the exact nature of the "Essence," the "Meaning," the *Signified* of "adult education" that all these various signifiers identify themselves with.

The Quilting Point

That this Master Signified to which all the various signifiers refer can somehow be cashed-out in terms of a set of objective features—the one-and-only, True definition—is the largely unquestioned belief of the field. In fact, this "multitude of 'floating signifiers'... is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning" (Zizek, 1991, p. 87). It is the Political ideal image, the signifier "adult education" that serves as this "nodal point." It may be easier to grasp this process of "quilting" if we take the term "radical democracy" as a corollary of "adult education" and observe how this signifier, this ideal image, serves to "quilt," to sustain the *identity* of diverse fields of political endeavour, in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe (1985). Slavoj Zizek (1991) offers the following account of this process at play:

Let us take the Laclau/Mouffe project of radical democracy: here, we have an articulation of particular struggles (for peace, ecology, feminism, human rights, and so on), none of which pretends to the "Truth," the last Signified, the "true Meaning" of all the others; but the title "radical democracy" itself indicates how the very possibility of their articulation implies the "nodal," determining role of a certain struggle which, precisely as a particular struggle, outlines the horizon of all the other struggles. This determining role belongs, of course, to democracy, to "democratic invention": according to Laclau and Mouffe, all other struggles (socialist, feminist...) could be conceived as the gradual radicalization, extension, application of the democratic project to new domains (of economic relations, of the relations between sexes...). The dialectical paradox lies in the fact that the particular struggle playing a hegemonic role, far from enforcing a violent suppression of the differences, opens the very space for the relative autonomy of the particular struggles: the feminist struggle, for example, is

made possible only through reference to democratic-egalitarian political discourse. (Zizek, 1991, pp. 88–89)

In the case of adult education, “the dialectical paradox lies in the fact that the particular struggle playing a hegemonic role [that of the orthodoxy], far from enforcing a violent suppression of the differences, *opens the very space* for the relative autonomy of the particular [feminist, class, race, gender...] struggles.” The irony in the current situation, then, is that the alternative lobby, in struggling to shatter the orthodoxy’s image of adult education, threatens to destroy that which “opens the very space for the particular struggles” that constitute the alternative lobby. This strange turn of events has arisen in adult education, and arises in other institutions, when those who come to embody the institution’s Political mandate, whether in a democratic or a totalitarian manner, declare this Law, as they are inevitably inclined to do, greater than, separate from, and independent of the Social.

The Problem of the Political

Of course, divorcing the Political from the Social generates legitimation problems. In the name of what, for instance, might the will of the Law be imposed—the Good of the many, individual freedom, Truth? If the Political, on the one hand, simply imposes its will, the Social will inevitably revolt, but if the Political, on the other, is reduced to the Social, it can no longer serve as the Law of the institution. The dilemma of the Political is one all institutions must contend with: the institution, in the act of distinguishing itself from Other fields of endeavour, comes into being *only* through its Political self-representation. In whatever form the Political is represented, the problem remains the same: the Law must be abiding, yet open to change; legislators are necessarily of the Social, yet must determine the Law for All; movements within the Social, whether of a social or political nature, represent particular interests within the Social, but must do so in the name of the Whole institution. The expectation is for the Political to be *within* the Social and concerned with the particular on the one hand, yet *without* and concerned with the Universal, on the other (Howard, 1977). The question remains, however, of what courses of action are open to adult educators, given the above and the institution of adult education’s current predicament.

Choosing a Course of Action

The issue of concern to adult educators here, is clearly one of power: in the name of what is power to be exercised, and on whom and by whom? Lefort maintains that while power must be represented, it is not something that one can, nor should try to, determine empirically: it is a derivative of *l’imaginaire*, the Imaginary, whose “function is to neutralize the conflictual origins of the social, to create the illusion of permanence and necessity” (Howard, 1977, p. 256). The function of the Imaginary, then, is to diffuse the potential arising from the division inherent in the institution, and it is in situations where Power is separated absolutely from the Social, usually through some form of transcendental legitimation, that institutions are most stable.

The price of such stability, however, is the blind imposition of Law on the Social. But Lefort contends that if *lived experience* is ever reduced to, that is, explained and determined in terms of, either the Political or the Social, the institution is being governed *ideologically*. For Lefort, “ideology is articulated in the attempt to re-create the... [institution] without history. The neglect of origins, the denial of the division, and the pretence of rendering the social space self-transparent are its characteristics” (Howard, 1977, p. 256). For Lefort, then, any attempt to situate and occupy Power in either the Political or Social is ideological: to attempt to do so in the Political is to identify oneself as an expert/leader; to attempt to do so in the Social is to identify oneself as an activist/militant. If we consider the courses of action

open to adult educators in this light, it should be possible to identify which are ideological attempts to situate and occupy Power in either the Political or Social.

Leader, Militant, or Adult Educator?

The first course of action open to adult educators is to identify with the orthodoxy, to assume the mandate of expert/leader. This would be to situate Power in the Political and divorce the Political from the Social by legitimating Power in terms of the "scientism" of the Western empirical-analytic tradition. While this would undoubtedly provide the institution with a greater measure of stability, it is an ideological course of action because it reduces lived experience to the Political and attempts to "bridge" the gap between the Political and the Social and in so doing diffuses the creative potential between the two poles.

The second course of action open to adult educators is to identify with the alternative lobby, to assume the mandate of the activist/militant. This would be to situate Power in the Social and reduce the Political to the Social, making it impossible to legitimate the Law in terms of something that appears greater than and different from the Social. This would further destabilize the institution by reducing lived experience to the Social. This course of action too, then, is ideological because it tries to "mask" the difference between the Political and the Social and in so doing, it too diffuses the creative tension generated between these twin poles.

According to Lefort, the only non-ideological course open to the adult educator is to pursue a theory of the institution that she or he knows can only be philosophical. To think one can do more is self-deluding *and* dangerous. A theory that ignores its own limits inevitably falls prey to ideology of one variety or the other. The task, according to Lefort, is to participate from "one's own place: one analyses, writes, talks. No more can be done.... To want to be the leader, or to think of oneself as the militant, is to be open to contradiction in one's own attitudes and from the social reality itself" (Howard, 1977, p. 260). The challenge lies in resisting the temptation to diffuse the creative tension between the poles of the Political and Social by attempting either to dispel or ignore the difference between the two poles, in pursuing a philosophy.⁴

Is Lefort's vision, while clearly more elaborate, really so very different from what pioneers in the field of adult education such as Corbett, Kidd, and Lindeman envisaged for adult educators over fifty years ago? Their belief was that adult educators should be schooled not only in the sciences but also in cultural history, that they should be able to understand the work experience of their students and navigate their way through different streams of knowledge. Specialization in any one domain of knowledge was frowned upon, while a liberal grasp of a wide range of subject areas and interpretive frameworks was encouraged. Envisaged not so much as a process of acquiring the tools of learning, as a way of learning the relation between knowledge and living, the aim of adult education was to serve individual and group adjustment by drawing upon the situations and experiences that mold adult life. It was to be a process, a *philosophy*, whereby adult educators, freed from traditional bonds, could learn to navigate between the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis—the Political and the Social—and dismiss any urge to diffuse the creative potential between these two poles as misguided and ideological.

⁴ As Howard (1977, p. 9) notes: for Lefort, "the task of philosophy (or theory) becomes an eminently moral one, social and engaged, which consists in uncovering the moments of praxis within a given social and historical structure." Consequently, this notion of philosophy must be distinguished from that of the Western empirical-analytic tradition: *theoria*—the pursuit of timeless, placeless Truths.

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