Non-Formal Political Education with Young People in Youth Work

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Introduction

Many of the debates surrounding political education have been rooted in the experience of formal educational institutions, yet there are strong traditions of activity directed at political learning that have little to do with schooling or further and higher education which has formed a thread of radical political activity and is evidenced in the concerns of Chartists and Owenites (Johnson, 1979). It is part of the self-learning activities undertaken by adults (Brookfield, 1983); and it can be seen in much of the activity directed at troublesome, and not so troublesome, youth. Given the pervasiveness of these forms and the extent to which their practice addresses some of the dilemmas experienced by educators within the formal sector, attention has to be given to this area of activity.

This chapter explores the nature of non-formal political education practice within one arena — youth work. In what follows I have made a distinction between informal and non-formal education, where the former is concerned with lifelong learning from daily experience and the educative influences in the individual's environment. Non-formal education is thus 'any organized educational activity outside the established formal system — whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity — that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives' (Coombs *et al,* 1973).

The History of Political Education Within Youth Work

The political education of young people has always been a significant concern of those sponsoring youth work. Milson (1980) has described the nature of the political element in youth service in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as casting young people for a passive role in the political system: 'good citizenship' was the aim constantly repeated but it meant conformity to existing middle class mores and structures (p. 13). Three key nationalist strands link early male youth organizations in particular (Blanch, 1979). First, the idea of *national efficiency* can be seen in the drive to mental and physical fitness, rooted in drill and discipline. Second, the idea of *model authority* was reflected in the ordered structures of these organizations. The system of authority by ranks and levels was seen by the proponents as providing a model for social organization and leadership. Last, there was the threat of the *enemy outside,* 'Outside Britain there lay a hostile force, bent on mischief' (p. 119). Much of the early work for girls and young women was directed towards reinforcing the emerging Victorian ideology of the family and preparing young women for their role as home makers (Dyhouse, 1981). The leadership roles they were expected to occupy were those seen as 'suitable' for women.

Whilst a great deal of the work may have been to buttress middle class power and salve conscience, there are examples of provision for young people from this period that took the debate beyond what might be suggested here. For example, much of the early work of the National Organization of Girls Clubs and its founders was concerned with lobbying for, and educating about, wage levels and factory conditions for girls. Girls were encouraged to take limited action themselves (Bunt and Gargrave, 1980; Bunt, 1975). Outside the boundaries of what the middle class defined as 'youth work', there are examples of radical practice (Smith, forthcoming). For instance the Clarion Scouts, founded by Robert Blatchford in 1894, as groupings of young socialist pioneers, claimed to have 120 clubs with 7000 members by 1896. They set up Clarion Youth Houses, forerunners of the youth hostels, and carried the socialist message from town to town on cycles (Simon, 1965).

Here we can begin to see some of the traditions that have informed the development of youth work and a hint of the ideological strains that can occur. With the rise of youth movements in Nazi Germany, many youth organizations began to proclaim themselves 'non-political' by which was meant non-party political. However, their programmes frequently expressed concerns about 'citizenship'. Indeed the development of the Association for Education in Citizenship in the 1930s found a number of supporters within the youth work field (for example, Brew, 1943; Edwards- Rees, 1943).

Not unexpectedly the ebb and flow of concern about the political education and socialization of the young within youth work runs in tandem with developments within formal education. Thus key figures in the social studies movement in the 1940s such as James Hemmings were given a ready platform within organizations such as the National Association of Mixed Clubs and Girls Clubs (later to become the National Association of Youth Clubs).

In 1969 the Youth Service Development Council called for work directed at 'the critical involvement of young people in their society'. It saw the youth and community service providing many opportunities for young people to discuss matters of controversy and to share in the formation of public opinion (DES, 1969). The report specifically endorsed political education and called for a level of partnership with political youth groups (para 212). Such recommendations have to be seen in the context of the growing concern about participation in policy formation, perhaps best expressed in the publication of the Skeffington Report (MHLG, 1969) and of the ideas and responses to the student unrest of 1968.

Similarly, the moral panic surrounding National Front activity provided a major impetus in 1978 to the DES granting substantial amounts of money to short term political education projects sponsored by the NAYC and the British Youth Council. These organizations used the Hansard Society's Programme for Political Education (Crick and Porter, 1978) to provide part of the rationale for their proposals.

Submissions prepared by the NAYC (1981b and 1981c) were to provide much of the material for the most recent national statement concerning political education within youth work:

Political education is not the same thing as political studies or civics though it may contain some elements of civics. Much of the political education in schools or even within the Youth Service has this passive character. It is not enough. What is required is experience of such a kind that the young people learn to claim their right to influence the society in which they live and to have a say in how it is run. It is active

participation in some form of political activity, formal or informal, which really counts. . . .

The youth scrivce has the potential to fulfil a much needed and vital role not only as a forum for the theory of political education but also as a scene of political activity addressed to issues which arc of concern to young people. Through the internal machinery of their youth clubs or centres, through the scope offered by various forms of youth council in the locality, through participation in local or national issues, the service can offer young people a real opportunity to express their views in the relatively 'safe' context appropriate to the inexperience of those taking part. (HMSO, 1982, paras 5.37 and 5.39).

The report recommends that political education should be a normal part of the youth service curriculum, pursued in such ways as to involve active participation. The inclusion of such a recommendation has meant that a number of organizations and local authorities have felt obliged to include something about political education in any policy statements that they may have. The report has also encouraged some reflection by workers (see, for example, Chandler and Hill, 1984). However, the reality of practice remains varied and the experience of action-based approaches, which the report so warmly endorses, provides rich ground for reflection.

The Nature of Contemporary Practice

The vast majority of units and projects are either not prepared to recognize or own up to the political dimensions of their work, or are unable to implement specific political education initiatives. A sample survey of units in the largest non-uniformed organization found that only 5 per cent of the 7000 units could be said to be making some conscious and acknowledged provision of political education (NAYC, 1981a). However, an interrogation of much of the content of Scouting and Guiding, for example, would show a considerable political education effort. The labels attached to such activity are varied but can be expressed in concerns such as leadership, citizenship and patriotism. In many respects this apparent discrepancy flows from the way in which workers within different traditions of youth work define the political. In order to explore contemporary practice it is necessary to have a working definition of

political education and here it is taken to be the conscious process by which people individually or collectively develop the knowledge, skills and feelings necessary to understand and act upon the institutions and processes that significantly affect society or a substantial part of it. I take 'society' to mean a tribe, a nation state or an empire and 'institution' a group of people organized for a specific purpose or purposes.

Using this definition, a number of key themes and forms of organization coalesce into seven reasonably consistent approaches (Smith, 1986). It is possible to make an initial distinction between these different approaches on the basis of the pattern of learning that is emphasized. Some practice expresses a pattern which approximates to information assimilation and other practice one which approximates to experiential or action-based learning (Coleman, 1976). The three approaches which broadly follow the former pattern could be characterized as follows:

Civics — where the concern is to' develop the understanding of, commitment to and ability to use the established political system and in particular those institutions directly connected with representative government. Typical examples of practice would include short programmes of talks, sessions to develop basic system skills such as debating and day-to-day interventions by the worker in meetings of say a youth committee designed at improving their working knowledge of the civic system (for example, Brew, 1943; Milson, 1979).

Issues — which aims to increase people's understanding and valuing of specific political issues. In many respects this is perhaps the most common approach and can be found in the creation of club and project environments that stimulate discussion — for instance through the use of posters, the wearing of badges, the provision of newspapers and the intervention of workers in an informal and discursive context such as a coffee bar. It may involve the organization of specific events and meetings on, for instance, nuclear power or racism (see, for example, Ritchie and Marken, 1984; Masterson, 1982; Wild, 1982).

Socio-historic — where the aim is to develop people's appreciation of themselves as black/female/working class and the historic and socio-economic dimension of that experience. Here examples include the provision of series of lectures for instance on Black History, informal and often anecdotal discussion and the encouragement of people to undertake relevant courses in formal educational institutions (Yarnit, 1980; St Phillip's Project 1983).

Three approaches could be described as broadly action-based or experiential:

Leadership — where the central aims would appear to be the development of an identity with key institutions both within the associated social movement and outside it, and the encouragement of particular skills and character attributes connected with 'leadership'. This approach commonly uses a formal organization with a hierarchy of roles. Participants then move through these roles if they have 'leadership potential'. Perhaps the most obvious examples here are Scouting and Guiding with their structure of roles and activities, but examples can be found in club work (Springhall *et al,* 1983; Eagar, 1953).

Participation -— here two strands were seen as important — the structuring of organizations so as to improve the extent to which people could contribute towards policy making and the fostering of particular skills and attitudes in order that they can do so. It may be expressed in the use of club meetings, youth committees and open forums where decisions about certain aspects of the organization's operation are made, in training events designed to develop particular competencies and through work with individuals or groups on a day-to-day basis (Youth Service Forum, 1978; Long, 1979-83; Burley, 1982).

Collective action — which focused on the development of both individual and collective sense of worth and the gaining of the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to organize. Often there will be a concern to develop in people an identity with particular social movements. Workers may help young people to gain the necessary competencies to organize specific campaigns and provision for themselves, provide administrative and other back-up to their efforts or run conferences and similar events concerning particular aspects of their activities, for example on local government finance (Taylor and Ratcliffe, 1981; Baldwin *et al,* 1982).

Finally the seventh approach is perhaps best thought of as largely action-based although in some instances it could approximate to the information assimilation pattern:

Cultural interrogation — where the aim is to increase people's understanding of the cultural forms they experience, their appreciation of class/gender/ethnicity as dynamic factors in the shaping of their experiences and their ability to make choices about their 'whole way of life'. Here the writing of autobiographies may be used to help people reflect upon the values and behaviours they have

taken on and the forces that helped their adoption, sessions to discuss experiences and involvement in cultural forms along with an exploration of how these forms express ideas about, say, gender and ethnicity (Cohen, 1982; Cohen, 1984; Carpenter and Young, 1986).

There is a peculiar combination of ideas and practices associated with each of the approaches. It is this combination rather than the ideas and practices in themselves that has led to the naming of these approaches and indeed in the use of the loose term 'approaches'. We find broadly similar practices and themes arising in a number of them. In this way there is a certain amount of overlap as one approach merges into another.

In what remains of this chapter I want to discuss some key questions that arise from a consideration of these approaches. These include the importance of ideology, the experience of action-based approaches and difficulties concerning reflection and theory making.

Ideology, the Definition of Politics and Debates about Practice

The civics and leadership approaches could be said to feature what Leftwich has labelled as an arena definition of politics (Leftwich, 1984). Thus politics and personal life are quite separate from one another. Politics is about what happens to nations and the operation of certain forums; personal life is what happens each day to individuals. In the 'participation' and 'issues' approaches this same conception of politics may remain. There may be argument about what institutions constitute the arena, with those adopting a more conservative position attempting to define certain issues out of the political arena and confine them to managerial or administrative domains. However, somewhere within these two approaches there is a transition or break into a process definition of politics. That is to say, where politics is not seen to be a separate realm of public life and activity, but rather a generalized process in human societies. Such a conception may be seen within a number of the examples given within the 'cultural interrogation', 'socio-historic' and 'collective action' approaches. However, as we move through these we may find definitions of politics that collapse its meaning to such a degree as to make it coterminous with the whole range of social relations or that present politics as a highly determined or conditional activity which grows directly out of the relationships of production.

As can be seen, these conceptions of politics will tend to grow from or connect with particular ideological perspectives. For example, a vulgar Marxism would yield the latter, highly deterministic view of politics (Miliband, 1977). Arguments about political education have to be considered with reference to the particular definition of politics protagonists utilize and the view of the world these reflect. This is particularly important as it would appear that often it is not concrete practice which creates disagreement, so much as the ideology that informs it, the nature of the social movement with which that ideology is identified and the definition of the subject area. The same activity located within different contexts can excite highly divergent reactions. The reference in the Review Group Report (HMSO, 1982) to 'safe' contexts is, perhaps, an indication of this.

The position is further complicated by the fact that the approaches outlined can be adopted in a highly instrumental manner and this means that simple connections between ideology and approach have to be abandoned. For example, particular 'civic' information may be required by a group engaged in collective action and it is acquired through attendance at a course. It does not mean that the course members necessarily subscribe to all the value positions implicit within the conception of politics, nor even to aspects of its practice. Nor does it mean that the worker necessarily subscribes to all the values and practices. It may simply be that they have a high 'use value' within the context of the worker's and the group's thinking and practice.

Overall this discussion indicates the importance of examining the ideological positions of those who are involved. If, as Gramsci (1971) argues, ideologies 'organize' human masses and 'create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle etc' (p. 377), then this is obvious. Clearly care has to be taken with such a slippery concept, and here it is used in the non-pejorative sense of *Weltanshauung* or 'world-view'. Such sets of meanings and ideas develop within specific social circumstances and may be connected with given material interests. However, here is not the place to enter into methodological debates about the nature of such connections, rather it is to assert the significance of ideology for our purposes. Particular ideological perspectives may well predispose participants to particular approaches; they will certainly influence how the approaches are experienced and interpreted.

All of this makes the relative neglect of ideology within much of the mainstream debate about the theory and practice of political

education all the more regrettable. When compared with other areas of educational and welfare endeavour, the contrast is quickly apparent. The problem isn't simply one of relative absence, but also concerns the lack of sophistication in the way the concept is applied where it does appear. For example, simple linear models such as that proposed by Porter *et al* (1983) may be compared with discussions such as that of Giroux (1983) or Lee and Raban (1983). It may well be that much of the debate takes place within or between so-called conservative or liberal reformist positions (Harber, 1984) and as such falls into the trap of labelling thought beyond the boundaries of their debates as 'ideological', that is to say, distorted. However, in doing so, major elements of difference are obscured and, perhaps more importantly, the positive aspects. As both the medium and outcome of lived experience, ideology functions not only to limit human action but also to enable it. 'That is, ideology both promotes human agency and at the same time exerts force over individuals and groups' (Giroux, 1983).

Workers exploring some of these approaches have come to see the critical importance of ideology. Much of the argument about political education practice is better understood as being disagreement about ideology than about the nature of intervention. In this there is the potential for significant political education. As Goodwin argues, the more aware people arc of the ideological nature of their own thought and the more explicit about values, the better they will be able to identify and criticize those of others and to promote their own. 'Most important of all, understanding the pervasive nature of ideology helps us to expose and scrutinize the hidden premises and values which arc treated as established facts in a particular society' (Goodwin, 1982).

The Potential for Political Education in Youth Work

The use of action-based and practical forms of political education within schooling has presented both practical and conceptual difficulties. Questions concerning the extent to which pupils are only playing at politics, difficulties about how boundaries to pupil participation are to be legitimated, the nature of schools as hierarchical organizations and the practical problems of direct engagement in local neighbourhoods have all been well aired (Tapper and Salter, 1978; Wringe, 1984). The relative failure of the Programme for Political Education to engage with these questions has

the charge that the movement seemed more concerned to preserve rather than improve upon the basic form of society in which we live' (Whitty, 1985, p. 157). Here I want to ask to what extent does youth work provide a 'context for a genuinely meaningful and critical education' *(ibid}*.

First we need to recognize that the sort of groups that full-time workers work with and within, will frequently have an organizational and legal status quite independent of the local authority. They are frequently the sort of groups that Entwistle had in mind when advocating associational democracy — local drama groups, football clubs, churches, mothers' unions and townswomen's guilds, chambers of commerce, learned societies, cooperative societies, philanthropic associations and consumer groups. (This is Entwistle's list, 1981.) Thus while the worker may be employed by a local authority and therefore in some way bound by its policies, the groups which s/he is employed to assist are not. In effect we have organizations that are 'flatter' than most formal educational institutions; which through their 'associational' status have structures that are open to a certain amount of direct participation by the membership or local community; and that engage with political institutions at the macro-level in a way that is rather more plastic to their members (Smith, 1984). We therefore have a site for political education of the 'participative' kind that could be a good deal more convivial than that afforded by the formal educational institution.

A second factor in the ability of youth workers to engage in more critical forms of political education is the very marginality of their work. The youth service budget usually accounts for less than 1 per cent of any local education authority budget and is therefore on a par with adult education. As such it tends to be subjected to a relatively lower degree of scrutiny, that is until a club or project enters into what the politicians and policy makers feel is their territory. Even here the very marginality of these educational forms can act in their 'favour'. Reeves and Chevannes (1984) make this point when discussing the development of parallel provision for black young people. The very existence of projects outside the formal sector that are engaged in the construction of a relevant education for black young people allows policy makers to slip away from tackling the more fundamental problem of racism in the school and its curriculum. They can always argue that they are already doing something. It is one thing to allow a critical political education in a 'marginal' sector, quite another to face it in schools.

Third, the nature of the 'contract' between learner and educator

is somewhat different to that experienced in formal education and is bound by different conventions. The learner enters into the process voluntarily. Young people are not required by law to attend youth centres. It may be that the range of opportunities open to young people in a particular area is such that there is little effective choice, but the fundamental fact remains that they may choose not to attend. Nor is the process usually bound up with formal accreditation or certification. Hence the costs of rejecting youth work or community work provision could be seen as 'lower' in this respect. This apparent ability to accept or reject provision is an important plank in the case for political education in youth work settings. However, youth workers have been open to criticisms because they may appear to offer one thing, 'leisure opportunities', yet may see their prime aim as something else, say social education or political education.

Whilst there is potential here, it could be argued that as soon as critical approaches to political education become effective, they will excite considerable opposition. Fear of the implications of such opposition may lead workers to restrict their activities to those which are considered as 'safe' by their employers (Smith, 1984). There are a number of accounts which demonstrate some of the problems that workers can encounter (Taylor and Ratcliffe, 1981; Rosseter, 1987). However, as Ingram (1987) demonstrates, even when difficulties are encountered, there are strategies that can defend space for critical work, although these can be extremely wearing for the workers concerned. Thus, whilst the level of discretion at the 'front-line' combined with the 'associational' nature of the organizations within which workers operate and the relationship between workers and young people does mean that there are countervailing forces, the potential for a critical political education that attempts to connect theory making with political action is still to be fully recognized.

Reflection and Theory Making

Many of the fears expressed about the nature of an activity labelled political derive from a more general lack of specificity about the purpose of youth work. Part of the problem lies with the scale and nature of the youth work labour force. Within the youth club/youth project sector 97 per cent of face-to-face workers are part-time, two thirds of whom are unpaid (Harper, 1985). The overwhelming bulk *84*

of the work undertaken within uniformed organizations is voluntary. Most workers possess little specialist training or indeed time to reflect upon what they are doing. Caught between leisure provision, welfare and education, it is only a minority of units which express a sustained and vibrant sense of educational endeavour (Jeffs and Smith, 1987b). If workers possessed that educational sense and the appropriate conceptual framework and competencies, then the rationale for engaging in explicit political education would be all the clearer.

In addition youth work is blessed with a pernicious anti-intellectualism. One of the common themes in youth work and community work is the concentration on experience and the downgrading of approaches that could be seen as approximating to information assimilation. Indeed, there is hostility to the idea of theory itself (Jeffs and Smith, 1987a). 'Issues' such as racism and sexism can therefore appear in a disconnected way, as can the very elements of practice. There is a tendency in much that passes for experiential learning in youth work to rely on the experience itself as a means of learning. As a consequence, little attention is paid to reflection. Here reflection being taken to mean the recollection of salient events, attending to feelings and the re-evaluation of the experience (Boud *et al,* 1985). Without such reflection it is difficult to see how theory can be made.

The undervaluing of theory making isn't the only problem. Situations may or may not be set up for the primary purpose of enabling learning. Workers may find themselves operating in pubs, discos and leisure centres. This has important implications for the way in which participants view the endeavour, where what is apparently offered is some form of entertainment or social provision, yet workers within those settings may wish to engage them in 'education'.

In addition, the classic tension between product and process is well to the fore. All the approaches have both product and process outcomes. Here I am using 'process' to refer to the ways in which different resources (or inputs) are used. Products are the concrete events or things that we create. Both products and processes will have results or outcomes. Youth workers and administrators are often keen on work that can be readily seen and counted. Thus annual reports will contain information about product outcomes — the number of cups won, attendance at various sessions and so on. Process results are far less tangible. They are to do with the strengthening of people's competence and feelings. A group may be campaigning

for the siting of a health centre on their estate. The product if they are successful, would be a new health centre. The process — working as a group, organizing, lobbying and so on — may well lead to certain process outcomes such as a growth in competence, confidence, enjoyment and knowledge. Which is the group to concentrate upon, particularly given that the achievement of their product goal could also lead to a strengthening of their confidence? In addition, developing an understanding of process requires particular competencies in the worker and substantial time devoted to it. Thus, alongside the tension between product and process, there are inherent difficulties in approaching process within a largely non-reflective ethos.

Some of the approaches have built-in mechanisms in order to test memory and ability — perhaps the most obvious example here being the uniformed youth organizations with their badges and tests. Others, where there is a strong sense of the educational, find ways of creating the room for reflection and of enabling people to build and apply theory as, perhaps, some of the examples of practice given suggest. However, the informality of the settings, the voluntary and multifaceted nature of any 'contract' between learners and educators in non-formal approaches, the lack of specialist training, and a general anti-intellectualism and lack of attention to purpose, contribute to the relative neglect of the reflective process. As Yarnit (1980) has commented about adult education in the community, what can result is vacuous gimmickry and an obsession with form at the expense of content.

Conclusion

Youth work provides us with a fascinating set of contrasts. On the one hand there are workers who have striven to develop approaches to political education that do connect with the experiences of everyday life and that utilize and lead to action. It can be seen that the nature of youth work organization does allow for experiential forms, but that this is hampered by a limited sense of the educational and fear of entering territory labelled as 'political'. In addition, the crucial importance of ideology and ideological critique has been highlighted. What is revealed, though, is that there are possibilities for a critical political education within the non-formal sector.

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