

Theme 3

Challenges of the postmodern 'Learning Society' A critical approach

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Introduction

The debate of the past decade has made it convincingly clear to us that we live in a 'learning society' (see Field 2000). At the same time, it has also conveyed the irritating impression that we attach very different notions to this label. Is it new knowledge that turns modern societies into *cognitive societies* and forces each of us to be a life-long learner? Is it the breathtaking speed and nature of social transformation processes, with all their inestimable risks, that threaten us and coerce us to take part in incessant learning? Or is it ultimately our own life 'programme' that has changed - the biographical constructions that 'reflexive modernity' compels us to adopt, to borrow that ongoing

populist label coined by Beck and Giddens (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1996)?

We can obviously sense the changes in modernised modernity with some precision. We experience that macrosociological transformations are occurring. We also notice that microsociality is affected, too. What we are missing, it would seem, is a 'concept' (in the Hegelian sense) that renders these changes transparent for our understanding. The *learning society* seems to be nothing more than an auxiliary construct - an aid.

As early as 1995, Richard Edwards pointed out that the reason why the label *learning society* has acquired so much acceptance is that its conceptual clarity is extremely limited and that very different notions can hide behind it. In a cursory analysis of

the international debate, he identifies three dominant types of *learning society* (see Edwards 1995):

Type 1: The concept of a *free, democratic education society* which offers all its members the same opportunities to use formal education facilities (which therefore must be expanded accordingly). This concept has been developed mainly by liberal, urban educators in western welfare states in the 1960s and 1970s.

Type 2: The concept of a *free education market* where various education institutions offer competing learning arrangements aimed at improving people's (vocational) training and raising their level of qualification, and at increasing the economy's competitive strength. This concept emerged during the years of economic uncertainty since the mid-1970s and has been propagated primarily by (conservative) governments and industrial associations.

Type 3: The *'postmodern' concept of open learning networks* which are able to foster a wide range of skills and abilities. This concept foresees learners using those networks creatively on a 'self-directed' basis just to satisfy their learning needs according to their own notions.

Edwards noted rather realistically that current practice is dominated by the economic concept of a learning market based on the principle of competi-

tion. As a result, the 'equal opportunity gap' between social strata is growing disproportionately, and the goal of achieving a broader mobilisation of yet undeveloped skills and abilities remains unmet. In practice, the egalitarian, democratic ideal of expanding educational institutions and opening them to everyone has, undoubtedly, a smaller basis in a society for self-directed learning than in a society that functions with an underlying structure of entitlement and qualification.

Richard Edwards, however, believes (and in this respect he accords with the position of other European experts, with the crucial statements in the Delors Report (1996), in particular), that neither the further expansion of the formal education system nor a radical commercialisation of educational provision are a solution. Instead, future development must lead to overlapping local, regional, national and global learning networks which people who are interested in learning can use autonomously to examine the structured diversity of the modern world in an open learning environment.

Attractive though this option may sound, it could suffer from empirical weaknesses. The following thoughts are a cautious attempt to fill this 'empirical gap' and to illustrate by means of a developed conceptual framework what characterises a *learning society* of the future and what research issues are raised on the way to this goal.

I go back, here, to a diagnosis which I presented at the *3rd Esrea Research Conference at Brussels 1998*.

Recent empirical studies will complete the prognosis of those days. It started, by the way, with two hypotheses: one on the level of macro-sociology, namely a certain trend of a *'postmodernisation of society'*, the second one on the micro-level which included what I used to call the *'biographisation of the social'*. I shall explain these hypotheses carefully in the first and second section of my contribution.

What is even more important seems to be the question: What actually happens to the 'meso-level', i.e. to institutional and non-institutional *learning environments*? How is the everyday reality of European adult education infected by the 'mega trends' mentioned above? I shall address this question in my third section. - However, before this, we should reconstruct some interesting changes on the 'macro-level' of European educational politics during the past 50 years.

The macro-social challenge: 'Postmodernisation' of society

If there is one issue that has lent wings to adult education research in the post-war period, it is the question of the 'non-public' of organised adult education, as Filippo de Sanctis (1988), the Italian adult education theorist, used to call it; the analytical search for those members of society who keep away - either deliberately or through lack of information - from the adult education programmes publicly on

offer.

The fact that this question has managed to occupy research interest in a number of countries since the late 1950s, including Scandinavia, Great Britain, Germany and France, was due to a specific hegemonial constellation that no longer arose in the decades that followed - at least not in such a form - namely a somewhat unusual alliance between social-democratic reformism and capital's drive to modernise both itself and society (see von Friedeburg 1992). What one side envisaged as an emancipatory opportunity for personal growth, especially for the working classes, was seen by the other side as the benefits of having the wide-ranging skills within the workforce that were considered essential if Europe was to remain competitive against the USA on the world market. This joint initiative produced ideas like 'second chance education' from Scandinavia to Austria, from the 'Open University' in Britain to the '150 hours' project in Italy.

The impulse generated by these reforms did indeed change the respective societies of Northern and Central Europe. In my own country (my comments are based on figures for West Germany prior to unification), the percentage of working class children who go on to study at universities has more than quadrupled since the early 1950s, from just 4% to almost 18% (see Vester et al. 1992, p. 169f). The proportion of women in higher education - certainly another indicator of reform - virtually tripled over

the same period from 14% to 39% (see *ibid.*)

In Scandinavia we are witnessing developments that are sometimes even more radical than this, or, for example in Great Britain or France, more gentle. The tendency is clearly apparent. Educational reforms are *opening* the social space in European societies and mobilising and modernising social structures (see *Fig. 2*). Adult education plays a crucial role in this process, frequently acting as a catalyst for educational processes that lead into the institutions of higher education.

No major theory in Europe has explained this process more succinctly than *Pierre Bourdieu's* (see

1979, in particular). But none has been so ruthless in taking the wraps off the ambivalence inherent in this development. Reading Bourdieu helps us to understand what the educational reforms have actually brought about: His concept of '*symbolic capital*' (Bourdieu 1983) has rendered the complexity of social change more transparent. Once we realise that no man or woman is situated in the social space purely according to his or her economic capital assets, then education can be assigned the value and significance it actually has as a factor in social change. Because we possess different kinds of 'capital' besides the economic, namely *cultural* and

social capital, the total volume of which ultimately

I am introducing this rather simple 'exercise' in

assigns us to our place in society (see following *Fig. 1*).

In a well-known television interview¹, Bourdieu used the metaphor of a casino. We gamble not only with the 'black chips' that represent our economic capital. We also use the 'blue chips' symbolising our cultural capital, our exams and titles, what we know about people, about our minds and bodies, about art and society. The 'red chips' are perhaps the social capital we possess, our 'connections', the social access to resources that not everyone has. Taken together, all these different sorts of chips form our 'capital'.

¹ Broadcast on German television (ARD) in 1987.

order to awaken our senses to the kind of changes that the educational reforms of the last 40 years have brought about in Europe. Adult education played a key role here, not just because it initiated upward educational mobility, but also because parents were encouraged to envisage educational pathways for their children that were out of bounds to themselves and their own parents. This effected a shift in placements within the social space - from lower right to centre left (see following *Fig. 2*).

Working class kids could suddenly become teachers or social workers, technical employees or medical technologists (see Vester et al. 1992). Sons

and daughters from the petty bourgeoisie could rise to become university professors. The feeling of being able to change society through education seemed to be substantiated by the facts. In many European societies in that period - we are referring to the 1960s and 1970s - there was a special kind of euphoria that 'anything is possible' (Friedeburg 1994). New perspectives appeared to be opening up without difficulty.

The intoxication of this reformist euphoria did not survive the cohorts that profited directly from its impacts. Bourdieu's theoretical framework is useful here, too, for understanding where the surprising ambivalences lay. Those who are granted the opportunity to acquire educational titles that their parents could not even dream of experience two disturbing things:

- Academic titles shed value in proportion to the extent they are acquired by these people and others like them. The supply of 'blue chips', if you like, has swollen artificially as a result of government policy. Therefore, their 'market value' has fallen sharply. The social prestige of teachers or even university professors - traditionally very high in all European societies after the Second World War - has shrunk considerably: a classical example of *inflation* (see Alheit 1993, 1994a).
- Acquiring the title has by no means provided an 'entry ticket' to the 'better society'. Many of the upwardly mobile notice that they have left be-

hind the milieu they stem from, but are not at all at home in their new social surroundings. They are made to feel, or they notice intuitively, that a title does not guarantee the habitus that was classically associated with it. In many cases, those who have climbed the ladder feel socially out of place. They come to realise that distinction is something beyond mere titles.

The successor cohorts - Bourdieu calls them '*the bamboozled generation*' (Bourdieu 1979) - are even harder hit. They might have the chance to acquire recognised titles, but the jobs to go with them no longer exist. The labour market closes precisely at that locus where the social space had opened a decade before: in the 'human services' and particularly in the educational field. Many university departments, in the humanities and social sciences at least, discharge their graduates into the ranks of the unemployed (see Alheit 1995).

Adult education is doubly afflicted by this trend. *Firstly*, entry into the labour market is generally made more difficult for people with academic qualifications. The long process of scientisation and professionalisation is obviously slowed down. *Secondly*, openings in public service are increasingly scarce due to budgetary constraints. Academic careers have been replaced by 'social loopings' (see *ibid.*), and educational reforms have degenerated into orgies of public spending cuts. Equality of opportunity in society has not improved in the

slightest (Alheit 1993). Even if specific 'cleavages' have shifted position, class society is by no means eradicated.

However, 'class society' has actually acquired a new function. Classes have ceased to be milieus that convey social morals and which give people a home in society. Social origins have more or less degenerated into a mere resource for the coerced creation of new biographical perspectives - temporary and fluctuating identities (see Beck 1992; Alheit 1994a).

This indicates a kind of '*postmodernisation*' of society. Classical modernity's recognition of societal inequalities and its essential aim of eradicating these through 'enlightenment' is covered over and obscured by an untrammelled process of differentiation. This is manifested by, at least, two new and symptomatic constellations that are worth analysing and which could prove of major importance for the future development of European adult education research:

- a kind of *pluralisation* of class society, involving some surprising effects and
- the tendency of *knowledge diffusion* in the so-called 'cognitive society'.

The pluralisation of class society

It is no chauvinism on my part if I cite my home society in order to illustrate this symptom.² However,

2. The reason I do this is that I was involved in a larger analysis of social structure in the former state West Germany that tried to embark on new methodological pathways (cf Vester et al. 1993; Alheit et al. 1994).

the (West)German development is rather typical for modernisation phenomena within the majority of modern European societies. - What is astonishing first of all is the observation that the main strata of West German society - the upper, middle and lower strata - have not undergone any dramatic shift over the last 70 years or so. A *distinctive* and relatively unchanged upper-class habitus is evident for about 20% of the population who possess a deeply rooted conviction of being predestined, unlike the 'masses', for social leadership roles. 50 to 60% of the population display the middle-class habitus, the *pretentious* ambition of 'being somebody' and to actually achieve this end through hard work. 20 to 30% follow the worker habitus, a mentality that adapts and conforms to what is *necessary and constrained*, within which framework the available opportunities to enjoy life and conviviality with others are indeed lived out and actually realised (see Vester et al. 1993; Alheit et al. 1994).

This 'conservatism' of social structure contradicts the fact that the inner coherence of the various strata has clearly relaxed. *Milieus* with their own internal life have developed from the old class fractions. And the traditional class boundaries, which run vertical, are joined by horizontal 'cleavages' that are perhaps even more effective at creating distances between social groups (Alheit 1994a). Differentiation occurs via *modernisation processes* that are difficult to link to the conventions of the classical strata. The dimension of '*self-realisation*' is

one element that lends these processes a certain dynamic, in contrast to established traditions.

Modernised milieus are on the rise, whereas traditional milieus are shrinking. In other words, social integration and systemic integration are drifting further and further apart. Attachment to specific social positions is losing the aspect of 'estates' that Max Weber (1964, p. 683ff) sees capitalist societies as still possessing (see Beck 1983, 1992). The feeling of belonging is no longer derived from the attributes 'income', 'title', 'rank' and 'prestige' alone, nor, as a matter of course, from class experience in the 'moral economy'. Particular lifestyles, gender- and generation-related experiences can substitute for them and indeed become temporarily predominant (see Kreckel 1992) - undoubtedly a sort of 'postmodernisation of society'.

The apparently stable social status that someone possesses is defined reflexively to an increasing extent. In itself, it does not guarantee any rights to a particular place or to integration in a (post)modern society. The significance of education - even where its effects are contradictory or indeed inflationary - has heightened sensitivity to the right to *self-realisation* and has led to a cultural focus and an orientation to consumption even where financial resources are tight. Nevertheless, this substantiates the basic importance of adult education and certainly qualifies all-too-pessimistic perspectives.

Knowledge diffusion

The gradual change from class society to the 'lifestyle' or 'event society' (Schulze 1992) has also altered social knowledge. Knowledge is no longer a secure fundus, or a resource comprising a clear hierarchy of meanings, but rather a phenomenon that is dependent on its *contexts*. If we look at the latest picture from the ongoing analysis of milieus in Germany,³ the impression is created of a confused landscape of mentalities that, each for itself, have both inclusive and exclusive impacts simultaneously. The classical 'us down here and them up there' metaphor used with effect by the labour movement to mobilise its constituents has long become obsolete as a description of one's location in the social fabric. Mutually excluding milieus have come into being both 'down here' and 'up there'. Social inequality possesses not only a 'ranking bias', but also a 'lifestyle dynamic' (see *Fig. 3*).

The hedonism of the young generation conflicts with the conservatism of old people, regardless of whether the young in question are higher or lower in the social rankings. Women's lifeworlds compete with male views of reality, with women professors *and* secretaries demanding their rights. The 'contextuality' of knowledge is becoming a fashionable phrase, with opinions being generated in 'discourses' hermetically sealed off from each other,

3. It is interesting that Heiner Barz and Rudolf Tippelt (eds., 2004) confirm more or less this picture in a recently published study on different educational milieus in German Folk High Schools.

such that any shared understanding between the diverse social worlds would seem to arise more by chance than anything else. Lyotard's prediction (1979) that we have lost the 'meta-narratives' of modernity has been subsequently corroborated, it would seem.

What this also means is that the euphemistic notion of the *cognitive society* fails at its own scientific roots to make real sense. In late modernity, scientific knowledge itself has lost its function as a source of orientation (see Beck 1986, 1992; Alheit 1994a). The scepticist realisation that science must waive any final value judgements because it is no longer capable of providing the truth is something we owe to Max Weber. We now know that even Weber's trust in the correctness of scientific *methods* is no longer tenable for us. The decision as to what is 'scientifically' correct depends not on inner-scientific consensus, but on the specific contexts in which such knowledge is applied. Scientific arguments are advanced not only by the champions but also by the opponents of nuclear power. Both sides lay claim to the scientific seriousness of their positions. The 'struggle between demystified gods' that Weber believed scientists should keep away from has been waging *within* the scientific community itself. The fashionable distinction between fundamental and applied research appears as a futile attempt to preserve the 'purity' of scientific enterprise. Such attempts fail because 'pure' research is infected by the same virus as 'applied research'. A major

proportion of scientific activity takes place far away from the 'freedom and isolation' of academic institutions, in the research laboratories of the military-industrial complex. One can also calculate the time it takes for allegedly non-purposive knowledge to be boiled down to possible applications.

The diffusion of knowledge becomes apparent to all through the dramatic spread of information technologies in the second half of the past century. For individuals, the media worlds they generate form a kind of 'second-grade reality' that is starting to make the boundaries to social reality increasingly blurred. Reality TV and computer games, the Internet and cyberspace have a tendency to cause extreme losses of reality and to obliterate the experiential world of social agents. In the picture puzzle of a gradual, insidious virtualisation of perception, the *cognitive society* is threatened by the 'agony of the real', as predicted by Jean Baudrillard (1983) more than 20 years ago.

Knowledge appears to have become something arbitrary, and its distribution is a matter of chance to an astonishing degree (see Alheit & Dausien 2002). If the ability to use the new media varies dramatically with age, if young computer virtuosi can easily hack their way into the host computers of banks, multinationals or even the Pentagon, the result may be an endearing type of anarchy, but it also means that the dependability or reliability of knowledge in the modern age is undermined. Here, too, post-

modern fragmentation seems to be the consequence.

Does this signify the 'deconstruction of the subject', as Derrida claims - in other words the final dissolution of modernity that originated in Descartes' *ego cogito = ego existo* equation? Is the *learning society* losing its classical protagonist, the learning individual? - It seems to be extremely astonishing that we obviously face quite a different trend, and thus I come to my second train of thought.

of the social

There is no doubt whatsoever that the conditions in which social subjects act - the 'intra- action environments', to use a Parsonian term - have undergone drastic change, particularly in the opening corridor of the social space described above. If we try to find an analytical expression of those empirical observations (see Alheit 1996), we identify three crucial symptoms related to the change in biographical action environments:

The micro-social challenge: 'Biographisation'

- an *erosion of traditional lifeworlds*,
- a *breakdown of classical milieus* and
- a *disappearing of 'normal' life course scripts*.

These symptoms are connected with the Habermas-Parsonian observation that the general levels of social orientation, namely '*culture*', '*society*' and '*personality*', including their resources '*tradition*', '*solidarity*' and '*identity*', have lost their function of locating social actors at an expected place within the social space.

However, one of the surprising results of a more precise analysis of personal biographies (see Alheit 1994b) is the recognition that reactions on the individual level are obviously less dramatic than we would expect. The path from systemic diffusions to a dramatic crisis of biographical action is a long one. Even the step from challenging experiences to new patterns of biographical construction seems to be more complicated than contemporary sociologists suppose. The reason for this is the theoretically highly interesting observation that the reaction to the collapse of environments is not necessarily a 'panic' reaction, but can include the rebuilding of action environments. In other words, the interdependency of action and action environments is not unilinear, but double-poled. Biographical activities may be transitional in nature. They reconstruct collapsing environments at a new level.

In my Brussels keynote six years ago, I mentioned three surprising new (if one likes: 'postmodern')

biographical coping patterns discovered on the base of research studies with social groups exposed to risk - young unemployed persons, women after divorce, teachers without work, migrants, epileptics and MS patients, homosexuals and young computer freaks (see Alheit 1994b; Scheuermann 1994; Alheit 1995; Hanses 1996; Dausien 1996, to name but a few):

- (a) the pattern of *biographical 'networking'*,
- (b) the pattern of *biographical 'patchworking'* and
- (c) the strategy of *biographical 'designing'*.

(*ad a*) '*Networkers*' are biographical engineers who react in a particularly sensitive way to the erosion of their former lifeworld. The disintegration of the family system and the immediate social nexus is processed actively at the biographical level. The result is not necessarily the neurotic attempt to cure everything, but more often the unpretentious effort to find a replacement. For example, we can observe many women after a divorce who preserve the intergenerational kinship networks of the 'old' family, and not merely for the sake of their children. We see that they construct completely new networks and that they fix 'matrilinear' relationships in the generational sequence of both their own and other families. This leads to new traditions, new obligations and new certainties (see Hagestad 1989).

We have also discovered that innovative lifeworld networks can develop within the new social movements, although within narrower limits, clearly

contrasting, by the way, with the more vociferous ideologies of the 1970s. Examples here are various communitarian projects, children's initiatives, or building and shopping cooperatives (see Effinger 1990). But here, too, women dominate the activities. Networkers are female. This fact must be clearly stated in the face of changing male identity. The erosion of lifeworlds is treated in a biographically active form by women.

(ad b) *Patchworkers*' invent biographical constructions against the threatening consequences of social differentiation and the loss of social integration in traditional milieus. Their strategy commonly consists in organising milieu-switching as a kind of biographical sequencing. We find examples of this particularly amongst upwardly mobile males who, unwillingly, progress from one qualification pathway to another without ever testing out the 'market value' of the various certificates acquired (Alheit 1995). This leads to moratorium cycles at progressively higher levels, where 'the sky's the limit'. Those strategies probably owe their biographical attractiveness to the fact that such passages are not 'individualised', but are traversed in new peer groups, so that loss of solidarity can be compensated by new patterns of social integration that are, of course, less binding in nature.

However, there are also the typical female patchworkers. At a first glance, these are 'hoppers' between employment and family phases in

biography. If we observe this group more closely, we also see how they gradually detach themselves from their background milieus and how they frequently achieve quite astonishing leaps in qualification level (see Schlüter 1993). But again, the way they go is no 'career', the experiences they make in various passages are 'in relation'. It could almost seem as if 'patchworking' is an alternative integration strategy for coping with the breakdown of social backgrounds involved in upward social mobility - ambivalent as it is for both men and women. How this process affects biography is completely open, both socially and individually.

(ad c) The third new type, namely *'designers'*, are biographical engineers for whom the openness of social space has become the design principle for their biography. They have established the greatest distance from the 'normal' life course scripts and utilise the free space provided by the 'artificiality' inherent in the biographies of upwardly mobile. They are no longer 'narrators', but collage artists. Designers stage and aestheticise their own biography: the relationship to their parents, brothers and sisters, their hetero- and homosexual passions, their sophisticated preferences (see Scheuermann 1994). 'Designers' are hedonists. They utilise their biographies as a stage.

We find this group in the most recent milieus of western societies, among homosexuals, ravers and computer freaks (Alheit 1997). It is difficult to

establish at first whether such self-stylisations represent a mere transitional phase, part of a temporary lifestyle as it were, or whether they conceal new and increasingly independent patterns for the biographical processing of reality.

What is striking, however, is that a cautious separation of concrete biographical actions from their action environments is apparent in the very presentation of these three types of construction. The basic assumptions of classical socialisation theories, namely that social expectations can be linked to individual needs, are thrown into question. Parsons' *pattern variables* fail to operate. System integration and social integration drift apart. There is also increasing evidence to suggest that it is the individuals themselves who have to create their own action environments on their own terms first of all.⁴

4. In his later works, in which he drew on and developed the radical biological constructivism of Humberto Maturana, Niklas Luhmann, the famous German sociologist, described similar phenomena as the *autopoietic* performance of self-referential personal systems (Luhmann 1984). For all the critical distance to systems theory that I maintain as a biographical researcher, I have to admit that Luhmann's analysis is supported by a number of empirical observations. What we are dealing with in the case of the coping patterns described in the foregoing are not just simple reactions to macro-social changes, *outputs* that occur in predictable ways in response to social *inputs*, but in a certain sense with *'mtakes'*, with forms of coping that are primarily determined not by the social impulse, but by an extant logic of biographical experience (see Alheit 1997; Alheit & Dausien 2000). Just as Maturana's organisms respond to 'perturbations' in their environment according to their own *inner* logic, as opposed to the laws of that external environment, so, too, do modern biographies process social change according to the 'logic' of amassed self-referential experience, not the patterns generated by systemic functionalities.

However, these findings of the mid-1990s which actually show a more or less optimistic tendency of people's informal learning capacity in late modern societies must be completed by additional results particularly in Central/East European transformation societies. Undoubtedly, here again, we identify in particular *'patchworkers'* and *'designers'*. Especially the Polish society seems to produce flexible biographical engineers who are able to handle the new and open situation after the 'turn' creatively (see Alheit, Kurcz & Zich (eds.) 2005): young entrepreneurs, engaged new political protagonists, younger people in the sphere of new media. However, this is not the only and perhaps even not the most challenging discovery. In a recent comparative study, we also identified an increasing number of younger (male) people who react on the new situation through a biographical coping pattern that must be characterised as an *'anomic'* one: people at the edge of society, often ethnic minorities, unemployed, deskilled, badly educated.

But, here again, we do face not at all a general breakdown of biographical strategies. On the contrary: action environments have been rebuilt in a remarkable way. However, their character is neither 'modern' nor 'postmodern'. We may call it 'pseudo-traditional', in many respects even 'pseudo-premodern'. What we are identifying here is a phenomenon that has different faces:

- *ethno-mafiotic clans* (with a certain criminal energy) particularly in East and South Euro-

pean post-socialist societies,

- *religious re-ethnisation* especially among migrants from East to West Europe, for instance the Russian-German immigration groups,
- *neo-fascist organisations* particularly in East Germany which try to re-establish a racist pureness of their own nation excluding all those who are 'strange' in a certain way.

However, these 'post-postmodern' constructions are far away from being 'traditional' in the old sense. They react to the same symptoms mentioned above: namely the *erosion of lifeworlds*, the *breakdown of milieus* and the *disappearing of 'normal' life course scripts*. And they react to a political discourse which obviously does not accept any alternative to more or less neo-liberal conceptions.

There is a dangerous drift in the postmodern learning society, a drift not just alongside the line separating the skilled from the unqualified, the winners and losers of mere economic competition, but a drift from the core area of a modernised civil society (which is represented by groups like *networkers*, *patchworkers* or *designers*) to an increasing peripheral anomic 'grey-zone' of de-civilisation, violence, even individual terror.

Undoubtedly, this is a real challenge to European adult education. It demands a new way of politicization. It includes a sharp critique on the lifelong learning discourse of the past decade. In short: it seems to be the very challenge at the 'meso-level'.

Challenges of the 'meso-level': The need of a 'new political turn'

In 1997, Neil S. Smelser, the influential American sociologist, gave a series of lectures on the state of the art in current sociology while he was the incumbent of the Georg Simmel guest professorship at the Humboldt University in Berlin. One of the key points he made was a prediction that 'if we do not keep our eye on the meso level, we are likely to be ignoring the most important features of the society of the coming decades...' (Smelser 1997, p. 34). Smelser uses the term meso level to refer to the intermediary processes in social life, juxtaposed between the macro and micro levels: active citizenship, honorary office, engagement in education and arts and other activities which increase 'social capital'. They are, in Smelser's words, 'the heart and soul of civil society' (ibid.).

Adult education in virtually all Western societies has its origins in this sphere. Over the last hundred years, however, it has increasingly become either a vehicle for implementing state control, or indeed a market instrument. The diffusion and post-modernisation of macro-level structures and the surprising and risky growth in the importance of the micro-level are now generating both an opportunity and a necessity to root adult education again in civil society.

However, the state of the art seems to be quite different: The astonishing consensus that appears to

reign on the economically oriented lifelong learning discourse extends from representatives of the traditional business community, to protagonists of the New Economy, to education experts in the modernised left-wing parties. What makes that consensus problematic is its indifference to the social consequences that would be unleashed if such educational policies were implemented without a measure of distance. The delusion of a *lifelong learning society* does nothing whatsoever to eradicate the selection and exclusion mechanisms of the ‘old’ educational system. Indeed, it may conceal and exacerbate those mechanisms instead (see Field 2000, pp. 103ff).

It can already be shown with present empirical evidence that labour market segments requiring low skill levels are in chronic decline (OECD 1997a). In other words, the expectations of the ‘knowledge society’ are raising the pressure on individuals to meet certain standards of skilling and knowledge before they can be employed. The risks of exclusion for those who fail to meet these standards are more draconian than was ever the case in bygone industrial societies. Of course, the *logic* of exclusion is by no means new – ‘class’ and ‘gender’ remain the decisive indicators (Field 2000, pp. 115f). As would be expected, *age* plays an increasingly significant role (Tuckett & Sargant 1999). Anyone who never had the chance to learn how to learn will not make any effort to acquire new skills late in the life course.

The crude mechanisms of economic valuation

prompt a sceptical view of any future scenario for the ‘learning society’ – a small majority of ‘winners’, but with a life sentence to learn, may close its borders to a growing minority of ‘losers’ who never had a chance, or who voluntarily liberated themselves from the straitjacket of having to perpetually acquire and market new knowledge and react anomalously. The OECD forecast, in any case, comes close enough to the scenario just painted: ‘For those who have successful experience of education, and who see themselves as capable learners, continuing learning is an enriching experience, which increases their sense of control over their own lives and their society. For those who are excluded from this process, however, or who choose not to participate, the generalisation of lifelong learning may only have the effect of increasing their isolation from the world of the “knowledge-rich”. The consequences are economic, in under-used human capacity and increased welfare expenditure, and social, in terms of alienation and decaying social infrastructure.’ (OECD 1997b, p. 1) Alternatives are therefore needed.

A reasonable consequence would be to realise that lifelong learning cannot be reduced to investment in short-lived, exploitable economic capital, but that it must also be an investment – of equal value – in ‘*social capital*’, in the way we treat those next to us, the family, the neighbour, the co-worker, the other club members, the people we meet in citizen’s action groups or at the bar counter (see

Field 2000, pp. 145ff). In this field of life we are all lifelong learners. Nobody is excluded from the outset. Everyone is an expert. Shrinkage of this type of capital, declining 'confidence', the moratorium on 'solidarity' that Robert D. Putnam identified years ago in US society (Putnam 2001), is also economically counter-productive in the medium term. A balance between these two intractable types of 'capital', on the other hand, could lead to a new kind of 'educational economy', or, more correctly perhaps, to a *social ecology of learning* in modern, modernised societies (for detailed treatment see Alheit & Kreitz 2000).

What we are obviously facing here is the political core of the *learning society* debate. Major projects fired by a certain theoretical understanding of society (as in the 1960s and 1970s) are not the central issue here, but rather the realisation that learning in modern societies can unfold its quality only if the intermediary locations for it (companies, organisations and educational institutions) change in parallel, if genuinely new learning environments and new learning publics come into being - civil and democratic in mode.

Now there are indeed some highly developed concepts that attribute outstanding significance to this rather self-willed intermediary level. Gramsci's idea of a civil society provides impulses in this respect (Gramsci that are just as important as Habermas's concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, or 'public sphere' (Habermas 1962). Both sets of proposals are

based on communicative processes of consensus-building that are neither state-regulated nor economically instrumentalised. Another factor common to both is that they do not isolate the intermediary level within civil society, but relate instead to real social conflicts and debates. Gramsci speaks, from a more militant stance than Habermas, of 'wars of position' for cultural and political hegemonies, while Habermas uses the term 'deliberative politics', the capacity of civil associations to achieve their ends with arguments.

Outlook

There are already some highly interesting examples of this: In the process by which titles have become devalued, especially those in the 'human services' and educational sectors, more and more university graduates in Europe are compelled to define new fields of professional practice *themselves*. After graduation, they gather experience in initiatives, non-profitmaking associations and the like. More and more work on a freelance or self-employed basis. Some set up staff-managed associations organised along quasi-cooperative lines. In Austria, Germany, Denmark or the Netherlands, for example, these cooperatively structured organisations have developed into an important segment of the labour market and a terrain on which social science and teacher training graduates can gain practical experience (see Koerber

& Effinger 1995; Koerber 1998).

A professional action sphere gradually ensues between private households and informal communities, on the one hand, and the public spheres of the market and the state, with their formal organisations of companies and public administration, on the other. New organisations of this kind may be conducted like public institutions or private-sector enterprises, but they do not perform any state functions, nor do they have a definite commercial purpose (see Alheit 1994a, pp. 77ff).

The protagonists of these new, *intermediary* forms of work perform their person-related services in the educational, social and health care fields with such success because they mostly operate outwardly as 'staged communities' (Koerber 1998). The traditional primary communities, such as family, neighbourhood and organic milieus, are partly supplemented and partly substituted by them. Such tasks can no longer be performed *en passant* within the complex framework of housework and family work, through voluntary commitment or sporadic unpaid labour, as used to be the case.

How symptomatic and crucial this development could be is shown by the fact that traditional institutions such as schools, evening schools, theatres or broadcasting companies are also starting to take on intermediary functions (Koerber & Effinger 1995, p. 343). The relationship between 'producers' and 'consumers' of the respective services is 'de-hierarchised' in the process. The user

of such services is viewed less and less as a client, in the original sense of *ward*, i.e. as a dependent and unknowing pupil, a recipient of aid, a person affected or in need of care, and instead as an autonomous and knowing *customer*, who is also actively involved in the production of the service in his or her capacity as co-producer.

What we are already seeing here are elements of the 'New Way' with which adult education could reach its public, and the public change itself as part of a civil *Öffentlichkeit*. An interesting aspect here is that a model is developing in response to scarcity, and not as an artificial academic construct.

It is true, of course, these are still rather marginal phenomena at present, and that the civilisation of the classical meso-level institutions, the actual organisations, enterprises and associations, is still in its infancy. Yet the thesis I am propounding is that it is precisely here that the tasks and the opportunities of the *learning society* lie; in a civil bargaining process, it is essential to fill and shape the important space between systemic macro-structures and the biographical micro-worlds, two spheres that are drifting further and further apart. This involves not only risks of systemic monopolisation, but also and without doubt interesting perspectives for a new civil public sphere which prevents from anomic exclusion.

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