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# **‘Really useful’ knowledge and 19<sup>th</sup> century adult worker education – what lessons for today?**

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## **Abstract**

Mechanics Institutes constituted the first systematic movement to provide education for working class adults. Their history – like that of adult education in general - presents a conflict in which their possibilities for working class emancipation through collective action were largely eclipsed by Utilitarian liberals who saw them variously as a means of providing a skilled literate workforce, promoting individual ‘self-help’ and maintaining the economic and political status quo – three features which again dominate today’s post-16 educational landscape.

Many Mechanics Institutes failed but others had a significant political influence. Some went on to become institutes of further and higher education. Many MIs established schools to inculcate succeeding generations with the same values that had come to dominate the MIs themselves. Some launched auxiliary agencies – such as savings banks and building societies – designed to deliver to their students the promised benefits of ‘useful’ (vs. ‘*really* useful’) knowledge, accentuating divisions within the working class and contributing directly to the physical and financial structures of nineteenth century capitalism.

Important issues of collective vs. individual models of ‘self-help’, of what working-class education should comprise and how to realise its potential for social and political change are still with us, two centuries on.

# **‘Really’ useful’ knowledge and 19<sup>th</sup> century adult worker education – what lessons for today?**

**Richard Clarke**

In the last issue of *Theory & Struggle* Pete Caldwell and Peter Templeton draw attention to the collapse of the ‘Great Tradition’ of liberal adult education as embodied in the provision of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and of associated university extra-mural departments.<sup>1</sup> At the same time most trades union education (including the TUC’s own UnionLearn programme) has focused increasingly on issues such as workplace representation, trades union law, health and safety, equality, communication skills and professional development. In both cases the space for political education has become progressively smaller.

Education has always been contested terrain. This is especially true of adult worker education where conflicts over curriculum, constituency and control - what it should contain, who should receive it and who decides - characterised the establishment of Mechanics’ Institutes (MIs) some two centuries ago. MIs were not the first attempts to extend adult education beyond the limited confines of the seven medieval English, Scots and Irish universities but they were the first systematic movement to do so for the working class. Eighteenth century precursors ranged from dissenting academies though literary and philosophical societies and subscription libraries for the more privileged, to penny circulating libraries, local discussion groups and radical corresponding societies. But none of these (except perhaps for the corresponding societies, suppressed by the 1799 Corresponding Societies Act within a decade of the founding of the first, London society in 1792)<sup>2</sup> constituted an enduring movement in terms of the number of institutions and individuals involved.

By mid-century the MI movement had spread throughout Britain<sup>3</sup> – and beyond. Estimates vary from c. 700<sup>4</sup> to 1,000<sup>5</sup> institutes in Britain alone. Almost every sizeable town as well as many villages had its MI or like institution, often (as in Yorkshire and Lancashire) linked in unions for mutual support including provision of books and lecturers.<sup>6</sup> The form that MIs took varied considerably, according to local circumstances. All were initially for men, even in areas where women (and children) formed a significant part (and sometimes the majority) of the working population. Women were only gradually admitted from the 1830s, at first only as associates and to certain categories of provision, such as public lectures.

Most were established ‘top down’ by local manufacturers and merchants or by Liberal philanthropists and politicians, motivated variously by the need to provide a technically literate workforce in a rapidly changing industrial scene or by a wider vision of social progress in which education was a key element. Some however were initiated ‘bottom-up’, controlled by working men themselves. These often claimed inspiration from a mechanics’ class established in Glasgow by students who in 1822 seceded from Anderson’s Institution

(established in 1796 for the education of the ‘unacademic classes’ and where George Birkbeck had taught from 1799 until 1804, when he moved to London) following disputes over control. Self-advancement was a feature all the institutes but whilst it sometimes included collective advancement (of workers, or rather certain categories of working men) it rarely extended to any vision of the transformation of society or of relations of power and class.

One Institute that did begin with such a vision was the London Mechanics’ Institute (LMI). Its formation was particularly high profile at the time and was subsequently recognised<sup>7</sup> (as it is today)<sup>8</sup> as an early milestone in the provision of adult education for the ‘lower classes’ and the model for a movement which spread rapidly, not just in Britain but beyond, particularly in Australia and North America. It was also hugely contentious. The call for an MI in London was made on 11 October 1823 in the Mechanics’ Magazine, which had been launched that August. Aimed at the literate working class under the slogan ‘knowledge is power’, this cheap scientific weekly was the first of its kind and it was highly successful. Its editors, J C Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin had met in Edinburgh where they had been politically active. Committed to popular science (and to a successful publishing venture) Robertson wanted to break into the ‘closed shop’ of London patent agents and perhaps also to forestall a proposal to create a new institution under the control of the rival London Journal of Arts and Sciences.<sup>9</sup>

Hodgskin’s aspiration was more ambitious; no less than working class emancipation, in which education would play a key role. After an impoverished and joyless childhood Hodgskin had been sent aged 12 to sea where he was appalled (and politicised) by the arbitrary and brutal disciplinary regime. Following his court-martial and dismissal from the Navy for (probably deliberately) ‘losing’ a prisoner who was about to be flogged, he published a pamphlet An Essay on Naval Discipline<sup>10</sup> which challenged ‘pressing’ and working conditions for naval ratings. Later in an account of a walking tour in Germany he observed that the ‘landlord and the capitalist produce nothing. Capital is the produce of labour, and profit is nothing but a portion of that produce.’<sup>11</sup> These views brought him to the attention of radical circles in London, including Francis Place, a moderate and manipulative radical who engineered him a job as a parliamentary reporter for the Morning Chronicle.

The founding mission of the LMI as articulated in the Mechanics Magazine was to acquaint working men with ‘the facts’ not only of ‘chemistry and of mechanical philosophy’ but also ‘of the creation and distribution of wealth.’ The institution and its curriculum would be under the control of the workers themselves: ‘The education of a free people, like their property, will always be directed most beneficially for them when it is in their own hands.’ it declared: ‘Men had better be without education [...] than be educated by their rulers; for then education is but the breaking in of the steer to the yoke.’<sup>12</sup>

The response to their appeal was immediate. It came from individual ‘mechanics’, others (like Place) who saw themselves as their representatives and also from prominent social improvers. Birkbeck was one of the first of these and he brought with him other influential supporters including Henry Brougham (later to become Lord Chancellor but then a prominent barrister who had made his name successfully defending the publishers of an

article attacking the brutality of flogging in the army from a charge of seditious libel). A series of meetings in the autumn of 1823 culminated in a public meeting on 11 November, at the Crown and Anchor tavern in the Strand, attended by 2,000 people and chaired by Birkbeck who concluded the proceedings by declaring that the new Institute would be wholly in the hands of mechanics; ‘it should be an institution for their benefit and governed solely by themselves.’<sup>13</sup>

The LMI was launched in December 1823. Guarantees of support – and cash – poured in from an unlikely variety of sources left, centre and even right-of-centre. But disputes about who the new institute was to be for, who should manage it and what it should teach – accompanied it from birth. In the end pragmatism trumped principle: ‘money talked.’<sup>14</sup> Hodgskin and Robertson were ‘out-manoeuvred and out-financed.’<sup>15</sup> They lacked influence and patronage; George Birkbeck had already secured guarantees of support and was able to provide it. Moreover the new Institution attracted support well beyond the class of literate manual workers whom Hodgskin and Robertson had seen as its main constituency. In addition to ambitious and upwardly mobile managers, the Institute also attracted small tradesmen and ‘white-collar’ workers who formed an increasing proportion of the City’s changing occupational structure.

In the words of Eric Hobsbawm (who joined Birkbeck College, the LMI’s successor as a young lecturer in 1947 and who was its President from 2002 until his death in 2012) ‘The original founders were pushed aside.’<sup>16</sup> The Benthamite radicals ‘took over and diverted’ the LMI.<sup>17</sup> Control ‘passed to the middle-class supporters whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus.’<sup>18</sup> MIs ‘became props of orthodoxy and respectability instead of independent working-class organisations.’<sup>19</sup>

In fact the Whig patrons and benefactors of the LMI were less concerned with who managed the LMI (or who its students were) than with what it taught. Even Brougham – well after funds had been committed to the new buildings – was happy for the new Institute to be autonomous – if not in finance then at least in respect of its management. The Utilitarian liberals had no problem with the ‘facts’ of science, but their version of the ‘facts’ regarding the creation and distribution of wealth were very different from Hodgskin’s. Very different too was their vision of the consequences of education for the ‘mechanics’. Both were based on ‘self-help’, but for Hodgskin, self-help meant collective action to secure fundamental social change. For the Utilitarians, it meant personal advancement through sobriety, thrift and hard work.

By 1825 Hodgskin and Robertson regarded the LMI as a lost cause, whose existence depended on the ‘great and the wealthy’. Robertson severed all links with the LMI but continued to criticise it from the pages of the Mechanics Magazine. Hodgskin left the magazine, probably because Robertson saw Hodgkin’s political articles as impeding its circulation, and became editor of a more specialist (and short-lived) journal, The Chemist, one of the first to present science in class terms. On its collapse he focused on his political and educational work and with the support of Birkbeck, continued to lecture at the LMI. His first lectures, published as Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital (under the pseudonym of ‘a Labourer’) contain a manifesto for education as the stimulus for social change:

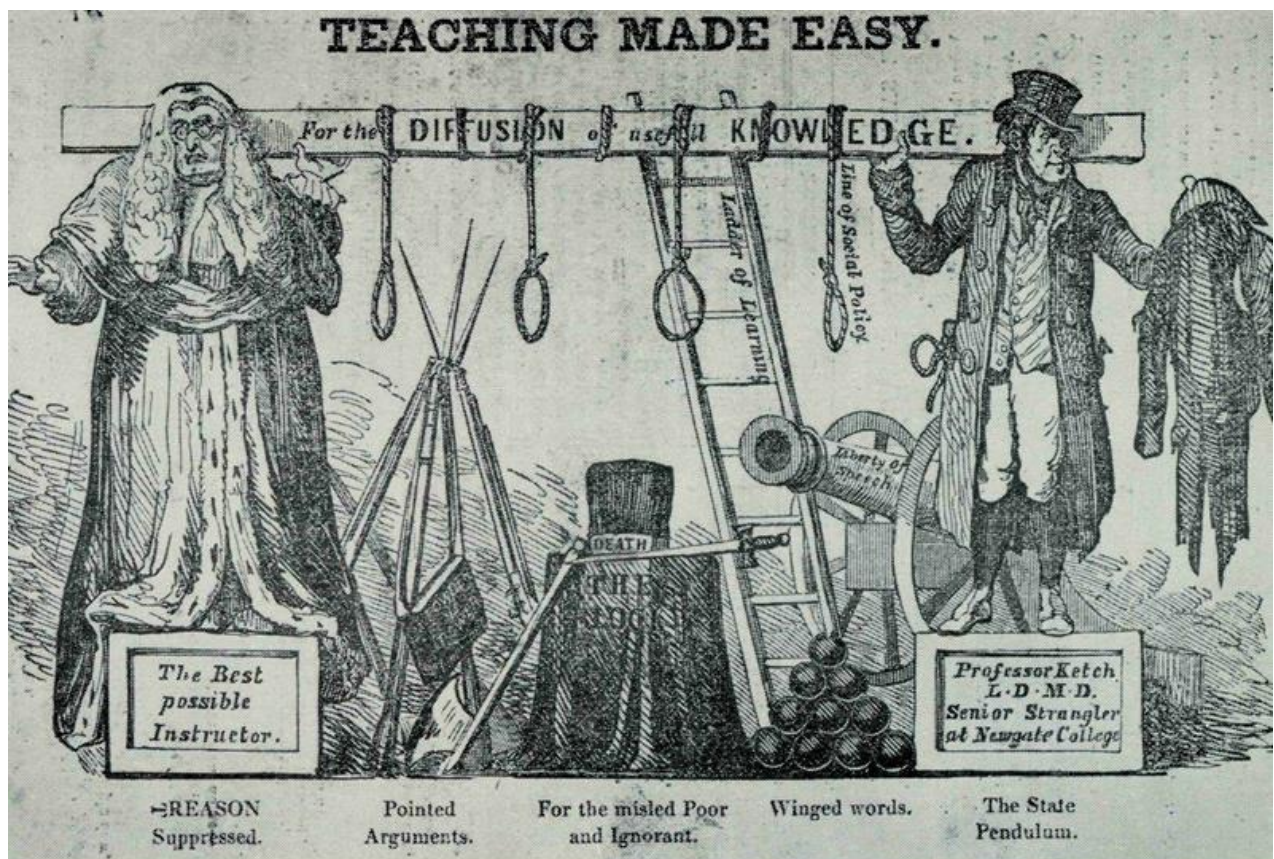
As the labourers acquire knowledge, the foundations of the social edifice will be dug up from the deep beds into which they were laid in times past, they will be curiously handled and closely examined, and they will not be restored unless they were originally laid in justice, and unless justice commands their preservation.<sup>20</sup>

Hodgskin's second lecture series, delivered (in 1827), again with Birkbeck's support despite opposition in particular from Francis Place, was on political economy. The lectures were published later that year, as were those of Birkbeck. They make an interesting contrast. Birkbeck's is a dense technical treatise on the operation of steam engines (written in conjunction with the engineers James and Henry Adcock).<sup>21</sup> Hodgskin's, Popular Political Economy subtitled Four Lectures delivered at the London Mechanics' Institution<sup>22</sup> was widely read and hugely influential. It provided the basis for Marx's theories of surplus value and is quoted extensively in his notebooks, written between 1857 and 1858, in preparation for a 'Chapter on Capital'<sup>23</sup> (later edited by Friedrich Engels as 'Volume 4' of Marx's Capital). Labour Defended - described by Marx as 'this admirable work'<sup>24</sup> was particularly influential. Published in several editions it was followed in 1832 by The Natural and Artificial Right of Property Contrasted.<sup>25</sup> Marx called Hodgskin 'one of the most important modern English economists.'<sup>26</sup>



'Merely' useful and 'really useful' knowledge. Publications advertised in The Times, Thursday, May 17, 1827 arising from two Mechanics' Institution Lecture series. George Birkbeck's The Steam Engine, Theoretically and Practically Displayed (top) adjacent to Thomas Hodgskin's Political Economy for the People which Marx used to present his theories of surplus value in Capital.

Hodgskin's views were in sharp contrast to those of Brougham who, prompted by the formation of the LMI, published them shortly afterwards as a manifesto in his Practical Observations on the Education of the People - addressed in its subtitle To the working classes and their employers. This declared that that education — including cheap publications and libraries propagating 'useful knowledge' — would be conducive to 'the peace of the country, and the stability of the government.'<sup>27</sup> Brougham's philosophy was promoted through his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) founded in 1826. Both the SDUK and its weekly Penny Magazine (launched in 1832 and which achieved a circulation of some 200,000 copies) were relatively short-lived (the magazine and the Society were wound up in 1845 and 1848 respectively) but had significant influence on the development of MIs during this period. SDUK pamphlets seeking to counter the views of Hodgskin included The Rights of Industry, Capital, and Labour (addressed to The Working-Men of the United Kingdom)<sup>28</sup> often wrongly attributed to (by then, Lord) Brougham and which Marx describes as 'noteworthy for the same superficiality that marks all the economic productions of that windbag.'<sup>29</sup>



An 1832 cartoon lampooning the SDUK and its teaching. From Simon 1960 (see footnote 15)

A popular response to the SDUK was ridicule, with 'useful knowledge' parodied by advocacy of the 'really useful' knowledge required for working class emancipation.<sup>30</sup> The Peoples' Magazine in 1841 declared: 'The 'Mechanics Institutions', with all other 'institutions' for the 'diffusion of knowledge' [...] are so many traps to catch the people [...] and prevent their attaining a knowledge of the true cause of their miserable and degraded state. We warn the people to shun all this as a pest.'<sup>31</sup> Engels had already by mid-century

written off MIs as useless ‘organs of the middle classes’, their teachings ‘uninspired and flabby.’ Their purpose was to teach students ‘to be subservient to the existing political and social order. All that the worker hears in these schools is one long sermon on respectful and passive obedience in the station of life to which he has been called.’ He continued, hopefully: ‘The mass of working-men naturally have nothing to do with these institutes, and betake themselves to the proletarian reading-rooms and to the discussion of matters which directly concern their own interests.’<sup>32</sup>

This last was not quite the case; whilst some institutes appealed to an upper stratum of skilled workers (or, as with the LMI, were increasingly patronised by small tradesmen and white-collar employees) other institutes retained a broad membership. However, whether as a reaction to middle-class dominance or to the content of their teaching, parallel (though generally shorter-lived) initiatives arose in the 1830s and 1840s, combining political education with family participation and equality for women members.<sup>33</sup>

In Manchester (where Engels first encountered MIs) the Institute, founded in 1824, was firmly in the hands of Manchester’s manufacturing class. In 1829 Rowland Detrosier led a breakaway group to form their own Institute. This survived some ten years, eventually transferring to an Owenite Hall of Science. Engels described his ‘surprise at hearing in the Hall of Science the most ordinary workers speaking with a clear understanding on political, religious and social affairs’ and he marvelled at the ‘the Socialist hall, which holds about 3,000, crowded every Sunday.’<sup>34</sup> The Hall survived only until 1850 when it was sold and became for a time the home of the Manchester Free Library. The original institute prospered. Significantly, perhaps, it was this ‘respectable’ Institute, dismissed by Engels, in which the Trades Union Congress was founded in 1868. For a period it housed the National Museum of Labour History and is now a conference centre.

### **Self-help, saving and security**

Such examples could be multiplied, in each with the MI surviving its competitors due patronage and funding but also to the degree to which it was able to deliver to the social groups for whom it catered, the material advantages its teaching promised. By the early 1850s, small savings banks has already been set up in a number of MIs as in Yorkshire, where they were seen as encouraging the same habits of prudence, thrift and foresight as the educational activities of the institute itself.<sup>35</sup> In 1850 the banker Charles Sikes instigated a Penny Savings’ Bank in the Huddersfield MI; this survived until at least 1883. Sikes clearly saw benefits to these banks beyond the services they provided to their investors, arguing that had they been established earlier, social unrest fomented by ‘the discontented, the dangerous classes’ would have been avoided.<sup>36</sup> Savings banks spread rapidly<sup>37</sup> many of them in MIs and similar bodies at least until 1861 when they faced competition from the newly formed Post Office Savings Bank (of which Sikes’ Huddersfield MI bank is commonly hailed as the forerunner).

Alongside the MI savings banks were land or building societies. The most spectacularly successful was the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society and its companion Birkbeck Building Society (BBS, one of the first of the new ‘permanent’ building societies), launched in the premises of the LMI in 1851 shortly after the collapse of the Chartist Land Plan



(formed to secure a County vote for those who could afford to purchase a ‘forty-shilling’ freehold).

Engels, in The Housing Question used the BBS as the focus of his attack on those who saw building societies as a solution to the problem of inadequate housing, arguing that they were relevant only to those who already enjoyed financial security. ‘These building societies are not workers’ societies, nor is it their main aim to provide workers with their own houses. On the contrary, we shall see that this happens only very exceptionally.’ The bigger societies in particular may be ‘sometimes formed under political or philanthropic pretexts, but in the end their chief aim is always to provide a more profitable mortgage investment for the savings of the petty bourgeoisie, at a good rate of interest and the prospect of dividends from speculation in real estate.’<sup>38</sup> To illustrate his point, Engels quotes verbatim and in full from a widely placed BBS advertisement in which buying a house on mortgage is likened to the hire-purchase of a piano ‘with which most persons are familiar.’

Engels argued that building societies were no solution to the housing crisis and – like MIs themselves – were relevant only to sections of the working class with well-paid and secure jobs. As it grew within the LMI the BBS increasingly acted also as a deposit bank, an estate agent and a lettings bureau, selling (what today would be termed ‘sub-prime’) mortgages as part of a wider property market.<sup>39</sup> Prior to its collapse in 1911 (and its assimilation into the London and Westminster Bank, now part of the Royal Bank of Scotland) the BBS grew rapidly to become for a time the sixth largest bank (and the largest building society) in Britain (helping in the process to develop London’s suburbs) and it became a significant element in English property-based finance capital.<sup>40</sup>

### **Get them young...**

Other significant MI ‘auxiliaries’ were schools, initially for their member’s children. The Manchester MI ran a school from 1834 attended by several hundred boys and girls and in 1847 was the base for the establishment of the Lancashire (later National) Public School Association, formed to promote secular education for the working class.

The London MI was the base for the Birkbeck Schools, launched in its lecture theatre in 1848 by William Ellis, one of the LMI’s powerful early patrons. It seems likely that the schools were inspired at least in part by Ellis’ friendship with the Chartist William Lovett<sup>41</sup> from the 1830s (when Lovett was with others devising the original People’s Charter) and that Lovett was himself heavily influenced by Ellis who endeavoured, successfully, to steer Lovett’s Chartism into reformism.<sup>42</sup> By 1852 at least 10 schools based on Ellis’ principles were established in London and more in other parts of the UK.

In some respects the Birkbeck Schools were progressive. They were secular (the bible was excluded, with religion seen as a matter for parents, not for the school), usually for girls as well as boys, they avoided corporal punishment and they rejected rote learning in favour of teaching through a supposedly Socratic dialogue between teacher and pupils. And their curriculum - based on ‘useful knowledge’ - included physiology and personal hygiene as well as science. Like the early MIs they were attacked for threatening the hegemony of the Church schools and for their abandonment of the Bible. Their teaching methods — enlightened

for the times — were parodied by Charles Dickens in Hard Times for their focus on ‘facts’ (neglecting the emotions and little better than the rote learning they challenged) and for their emphasis on individual self-interest.

But their most distinctive feature was problematic. In parallel with science, and like it, taught – for younger children at least – via the ‘object lesson’,<sup>43</sup> ‘useful knowledge’ focused on what Ellis called ‘Social Economy’ – teaching about economics, politics and social studies designed, explicitly, to train pupils ‘in the various qualities which lie at the base of all social wellbeing - such as industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property, and forethought’<sup>44</sup> and to submit to ‘the science of well-being’ as a necessary condition of economic prosperity and of their own betterment. ‘Social Economy’ (used by Ellis in preference to ‘political economy’ in that it more explicitly combined personal morality with the workings of commerce) was, perhaps inevitably, given its secular nature, based on ‘natural’ law – but a very different natural law and with a very different purpose from that of Hodgskin.

Dickens’ lampoon on the ‘Gradgrind Schools’ was accompanied by challenges from the left. Thus in 1852 the Chartist Ernest Jones writing (of childrens’ education) in The People’s Paper declared, in words similar to those used by Hodgskin of the LMI a quarter-century earlier:

There are few things of greater importance than the Education of the People. But it must be remembered that a People’s education is safe only in a People’s own hands. [...] Now in Government schools, all tuition, whether secular or religious is biased. History, morals, religion, ay, even geography, chemistry, astronomy, every science, every art, is taught with a bias. [...] It is clear therefore, that if education is to be safe, the People must become their own educators.<sup>45</sup>

Gilmour declares that the Birkbeck School system was a ‘remarkable instance of the complex workings of practical utilitarianism in Victorian England [...] in essence, an education contrived to teach the poor their place.’<sup>46</sup> In this, they articulated Lancaster’s exhortation that schools should aim to produce pupils ‘trained to future usefulness to themselves and the community’<sup>47</sup> echoed in the Elementary Code of 1904, but in a very specific way, transferring into elementary education what by mid-century had become the largely dominant ideology of the MI movement.

## **After the Institutes**

The mid- nineteenth century was the heyday of the MI movement – in Britain at least (it continued to grow elsewhere, particularly in Australia). On its back (and as it declined) other initiatives delivered both technical and more liberal instruction; many embodying the same mix of working class enlightenment and containment as MIs themselves.

Best known is perhaps the (London) Working Men’s College (and still going strong in its 1905 premises in Somerstown, Camden) founded in 1854 by Christian Socialists led by F D Maurice for whom education would ‘eliminate Owenism and Chartism’ and for the worker ‘will point out to him his unjust claims and will satisfy his just demands.’<sup>48</sup> Chief amongst those ‘just demands’ was a vote. In 1867 a Second Reform Act roughly doubled the franchise

to around two million men<sup>49</sup> and added some urgency to the adult education mission. The demand for educational access from ‘below’ was matched by a growing consensus of its necessity from ‘above’ – if (sections of) the (male) working class now had the vote, they had to be taught how to use it.

While Hodgskin and Chartist leaders had argued strongly against state control of childrens’ – as well as of workers’ – education, there was now little opposition to state funding of schools at least. Ellis’ advocacy of teaching social economy made little initial headway following the 1870 (Forster) Education Act, in part at least because the new Board schools were under local control, but it contributed at least to some degree to the introduction of civics into elementary schools during the 1890s<sup>50</sup> and was arguably ‘the parent of all social studies courses that exist in schools and colleges today.’<sup>51</sup>

Adult education institutes multiplied, increasingly (like Morley College, founded in 1880) admitting women as well as men. They were joined from 1873 by university extension lectures (given in local centres by peripatetic lecturers) and from 1903 by the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and from 1907, ‘extra-mural’ tutorial classes and partnerships with local authorities. Other initiatives included a significant programme provided by the Cooperative Education Department.

Post-school technical education was put on a formal basis following the 1902 Education Act and from 1909 liberal adult education became the recipient of state funding. In all of these areas, issues of constituency, curriculum and control occasionally resurfaced. Perhaps the most significant instance is the Ruskin College ‘strike’ of 1909, the formation of the Plebs’ League and the inter-War Labour College movement which until its incorporation in the TUC Education Department in 1964 provided a trades-union financed alternative – including classes in Marxist history and economics - to the supposedly ‘balanced’ provision of the WEA.

Many MIs disappeared without trace. Some morphed into technical colleges, some eventually becoming universities. Others became public libraries. A few continue today as adult institutes. Many other MI buildings survive as nightclubs, warehouses or converted into residential accommodation.

### **Lessons for working-class adult learning today**

The history of MIs and of adult worker education is sometimes presented as the triumph of progressive modernisers over entrenched reaction<sup>52</sup> stimulated variously by a philanthropic move to promote what George Birkbeck called ‘the universal diffusion of the blessings of knowledge’,<sup>53</sup> by manufacturers’ need for a technically literate (and politically compliant) workforce, and by the hunger for knowledge and personal fulfilment on the part of their students. It is also a history of ideological conflict, crucially over issues of control and curriculum particularly in relation to whether the latter should include political economy and if so, *whose* political economy.

MIs promoted an ideology of personal advancement though compliance and assisted in the provision of the human and social capital that industrial capital needed for its production and reproduction. In the process, particularly in industrial regions of Britain they

became ‘vehicles for the social mobility and cultural integration of the artisan elite and lowest strata of the middle classes.’<sup>54</sup> Together with their auxiliaries – banks, building societies and schools - they fed off and fostered a growing male labour aristocracy<sup>55</sup> securing concessions and privileges which ‘ensured that the only section of the working class with any organisational strength did not use it on behalf of the working class as a whole.’<sup>56</sup>

Arguably this contributed to the decline of Chartism – in 1840 a mass movement, with the National Charter Association described by Engels as ‘the world’s first authentically working class party.’<sup>57</sup> Chase has contrasted the 1839 and 1848 Chartist petitions which mark ‘a gradual transition from a movement that emphatically mobilised whole communities, to one that increasingly espoused the politics of male-defined ‘respectability.’<sup>58</sup> Perhaps significantly, in London it was the Tottenham Court Road MI, used by Chartists, which hosted an address there by Feargus O’Connor, repeated at Kennington, which resulted in the procession to Parliament to deliver the last third petition being abandoned).<sup>59</sup>

J F C Harrison argued in The Victorian Gospel of Success that well before mid-century, self-help was:

practised as a spontaneous working-class response to felt needs. Its form was collective rather than individualist. [...] but between the early 1840s and the publication of Self-Help in 1859 the doctrine of self-help underwent a subtle transformation. What had been originally a working men’s device to try to grasp some of those cultural and material benefits which were denied to them in the new industrial society, now became the middle-class reply to workers’ demands for better social conditions.<sup>60</sup>

There are many issues here, not least the use of the term ‘middle class’ (which Engels used in his attack on the BBS) but more importantly the omission of any discussion of *agency*. What was it — alongside changes in the occupational structure of capitalism — that produced or facilitated this shift? The question of *agency* was crucial to the propagation of that gospel, and MIs helped to provide it. Their auxiliaries – schools, savings banks, building and assurance societies, were seen both as a means of delivering real benefits to their members and as a contributor to social stability. Samuel Smiles, praising Sikes’ promotion of savings banks in MIs, declared that ownership of property makes men ‘steady, sober, and diligent. It weans them from revolutionary notions, and makes them conservative.’<sup>61</sup> Together with their auxiliaries MIs delivered to some at least of their students some at least of the promised benefits of ‘useful’ (vs. ‘really useful’) knowledge and in the process accentuated divisions within the working class and contributed directly to the social, physical and financial structures of nineteenth century capitalism.

Today, as centrally funded post-16 education becomes increasingly compressed into a narrow skills agenda on the one hand and dispersed targeted inclusion projects on the other, with liberal adult education relegated to local voluntary initiatives and university curricula increasingly instrumental and orthodox, the need for adult learning opportunities to acquire *really* useful knowledge is greater than ever. Two centuries on from Hodgskin and the start of the Mechanics’ Institute movement, the questions of what contribution working class adult

education can make to the struggle for a better society, its content and how it might be delivered, remain critical.

It is clear that struggles need to go beyond attempts to preserve what remains of the fabric of post-16 education following the cuts imposed over the past quarter-century by both Labour and Tory administrations. One proposal, promoted by the IWCE network and the journal *Post-16 Educator*<sup>62</sup> is to work towards the (re)creation of a network of independent working class provision along the lines of the inter-War Labour College movement.<sup>63</sup> This would require significant effort and resources. Unions are probably less well placed at present to undertake this task than they have been for the past century. If for that reason alone, individual initiatives are likely to be varied and heterogeneous. The immediate prospects for injecting any significant element of political learning into the formal curriculum of further and higher education are limited.

At the same time, challenges to curriculum and control continue to surface both on the part of adult educators<sup>64</sup> and (although this has yet to match the ‘counter-course’ movement of the 1970s) on the part of students themselves, as exemplified by the demands of the Post-Crash Economics Society at Manchester<sup>65</sup> and its counterparts at Cambridge, Essex, Glasgow, LSE, Sheffield, SOAS and UCL, for a reform (and broadening) of the economics curriculum.

In parallel, several unions – notably the RMT, Unison and Unite – are re-establishing an element of broader political education alongside training for workplace representatives and sectoral campaigns. Within the Labour Party (following Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour Party leader) as well as in the wider labour movement there is recognition of the need, alongside political campaigning, to establish an informal ‘alternative’ politics, philosophy and economics curriculum to guide local discussion groups. And the Marx Memorial Library & Workers' School is already beginning to make its own significant contribution, drawing lessons from history to inform current struggles. Its archives represent a unique resource for teaching and learning and are increasingly accessible in digitised form. Its developing educational programme includes new on-line learning opportunities and nationally based work with individual unions and other labour movement organisations in parallel with its London-based programme of lectures, exhibitions and workshops. All these initiatives may represent the beginnings of a revival of left education.

## Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> Pete Caldwell and Peter Templeton, 'Political education and the WEA' *Theory & struggle*, 116 (2015),

<sup>2</sup> The Clerkenwell division of which met in the Bull’s Head in Jerusalem Passage, close to today’s Marx House. Andrew Rothstein, *A House on Clerkenwell Green* (London, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. James William Hudson, *The history of adult education* (London, 1851) and James Hole, *An Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics Institutions* (London, 1853).

- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Kelly, 'The Origin of Mechanics' Institutes' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 1, 1 (1952), also Edward Royle, 'Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860' *The Historical Journal* 14, 2 (1971).
- <sup>5</sup> Frederick W Robinson, 'William Ellis and his work for education' (MA, University of London, 1919), 83.
- <sup>6</sup> Mabel Phythian Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire Before 1851* (Manchester, 1957).
- <sup>7</sup> George Frederick Cruchley, *Cruchley's New Guide to London. A Handbook for Strangers* (London, 1867), Hole, *Essay*, and Hudson, *History of Adult Education*.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain*, 3 ed. (Liverpool, 1962; reprint, 1970, 1992); Kelly, 'Origin of Mechanics' Institutes'.
- <sup>9</sup> David Stack, *Nature and Artifice. The Life and Thought of Thomas Hodgskin, 1787-1869* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1998), 84. See also Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck, Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool, 1957), 85.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Hodgskin, *An Essay on Naval Discipline* (London, 1813).
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Hodgskin, *Travels in the North of Germany* (Edinburgh, 1820) See also Gregory Claeys, 'Political Economy and Popular Education: Thomas Hodgskin and the London Mechanics' Institute, 1823-1828' in *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis*, ed. Michael T Davis (London, 2000), 17.
- <sup>12</sup> J C Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin, 'Institutions for Instruction of Mechanics. Proposals for a London Mechanics' Institute' *Mechanics' Magazine* 1, 7 (1823), 102.
- <sup>13</sup> 'London Mechanics' Institute', *Examiner*, 824 (1823).
- <sup>14</sup> Kelly, *History of Adult Education*, 121.
- <sup>15</sup> Brian Simon, *Studies in the history of education 1780-1870* (London, 1960), 154.
- <sup>16</sup> Eric J Hobsbawm, 'Birkbeck and the Left; Concluding address to the 175th Anniversary Appeal Lectures at Birkbeck' *Times Change* (2001), 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Eric J Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York, 1962), 330.
- <sup>18</sup> Edward P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1968), 818.
- <sup>19</sup> Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, 88.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas Hodgskin, *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital. By A Labourer* (London, 1825).
- <sup>21</sup> George Birkbeck, Henry Adcock, and James Adcock, *The Steam Engine. Theoretically and Practically Displayed* (London, 1827).
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy. Four Lectures delivered at the London Mechanics' Institution* (London & Edinburgh, 1827).
- <sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London, 1973 [1857-1858]).
- <sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1976 [1883]), 475.

- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Hodgskin, *The Natural and Artificial Right of Property Contrasted. A series of letters addressed without permission, to H Brougham, Esq, M.P. F.R.S &c (now the Lord Chancellor) by the author of "Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital"* (London, 1832).
- <sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, 1000.
- <sup>27</sup> Henry Brougham, *Practical observations upon the education of the people, addressed to the working classes and their employers* (London, 1825), 5.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Knight, *The Rights of Industry. Addressed to The Working-Men of the United Kingdom. I. Capital, and Labour*, 2nd ed. (London, 1831).
- <sup>29</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Johnson, 'Really Useful Knowledge' in *Working class culture: studies in history and theory*, ed. John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson (London, 1979), 78. See also Richard Johnson, 'Really Useful Knowledge' 1790-1850: Memories for Education in the 1980s' in *Radical Approaches to Adult Education: A Reader*, ed. Tom Lovett (London, 1988).
- <sup>31</sup> quoted in Malcolm Chase, *Chartism. A New History* (Manchester, 2007), 144.
- <sup>32</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W O Henderson and W H Chaloner (Oxford, 1971 [1844]), 271.
- <sup>33</sup> Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture' in *Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor*, ed. S Pollard and John Salt (London, 1971).
- <sup>34</sup> Friedrich Engels '[Letters from London]' *Schweizerischer Republikaner No. 46, June 9, 1843*, June 9 1843.
- <sup>35</sup> Tylecote, *MI's of Lancashire & Yorkshire*.
- <sup>36</sup> Charles William Sikes, 'Mechanics' Institutes and Savings Banks' *The Economist*, 339 (1850), 341.
- <sup>37</sup> Albert Fishlow, 'The Trustee Savings Banks, 1817-1861' *Journal of Economic History* 21, 1 (1961), Arthur Scratchley, *A practical treatise on savings banks: containing a review of their past history and present condition, with rules, acts of Parliament, &c* (London, 1861).
- <sup>38</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question* (Moscow, 1970 [1872]).
- <sup>39</sup> Dennis argues that particularly in the economic downturn of the 1890s, building societies became the home for capital that in periods of economic growth was invested in manufacturing. *Cities in Modernity. Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space 1840-1930, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography* (Cambridge, 2008). Objectively, the BBS and similar societies helped to provide what David Harvey terms a 'spatial fix' to the mid-to-late nineteenth century crisis of capital overaccumulation and declining rate of profit. *The Urbanisation of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Oxford, 1985).
- <sup>40</sup> Richard Clarke, 'Self-help, Saving and Suburbanisation - the Birkbeck Land and Building Societies, their Bank and the London Mechanics' Institute 1851 – 1911' *The London Journal* 40, 2 (2015).
- <sup>41</sup> Ellis funded a day school to accompany William Lovett's National Association Sunday School (which Lovett had opened in 1843 in Gate Street, Holborn) and, with his friend

George Coombe, started William's Secular School, a school very similar to the London School, in Edinburgh.

<sup>42</sup> Keith Flett, 'Really useful knowledge and the politics of radical education with reference to the working class press' (PhD, University of London Institute of Education, 2002), 123.

<sup>43</sup> Based on a dialogue around an everyday object such as a penny. It has been argued that in science (let alone in social science) science taught through the object lesson was itself a vehicle for containing dissent. Bob Prophet and Derek Hodson, 'The science of common things: a case study in social control' *History of Education* 17, 2 (1988).

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Kell Blyth, *Life of William Ellis (Founder of the Birkbeck Schools). With some account of his writings and of his labours for the improvement and extension of education* (London, 1892).

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in James Jefferys, *Labour's Formative Years 1849-1879* (London, 1948), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Robin Gilmour, 'The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom' *Victorian Studies* 11, 2 (1967), 213, 214.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education, as it respects the industrious classes of the community: containing a short account of its present state, hints towards its improvement, and a detail of some practical experiments conducive to that end* (London, 1803), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Colin Waugh, 'Plebs' - *The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education* (Sheffield, 2009), 4. See also 'Christian Socialism or 'really useful knowledge'' (paper presented at the History of Adult Worker Education Conference of the Society for the Study of Labour History, Huddersfield, 28 November 2015).

<sup>49</sup> The Act granted the vote to all householders in the boroughs as well as lodgers who paid rent of £10 a year or more, reduced the property threshold in the counties and gave the vote to agricultural landowners and tenants with very small amounts of land.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon Batho, 'The history of the teaching of civics and citizenship in English schools' *The Curriculum Journal* 1, 1 (1990), 95. In 1928 Cyril Norwood, Headmaster of Harrow School, declared that 'elementary education has been a steadily civilising agency. It has, I think, been the main influence which has prevented Bolshevism, Communism and theories of revolt and destruction from obtaining any real hold on the people of this country.' Cyril Norwood, *The English Tradition of Education* (London, 1929), 171.

<sup>51</sup> W A C Stewart and W P McCann, *The Educational Innovators, 1750-1880* (London, 2000 [1967]), 340. The statement is only partially true. From the 1950s to the early 1990s, general studies (associated with technical education and industrial release) in further education colleges provided a space for political education that no longer exists to any significant degree.

<sup>52</sup> Martyn Walker, 'The Origins and Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement 1824–1890 and the Beginnings of Further Education' *Teaching in lifelong learning: a journal to inform and improve practice* 4, 1 (2012).

<sup>53</sup> George Birkbeck, '[Speech on the inauguration of the London Mechanics' Institute in Dr Lindsay's Chapel, Monkwell Street, Friday 20 Feb 1824]' *Mechanics' Magazine* 27 (1824). See also George Birkbeck and Henry Brougham, *The eloquent speeches of Dr. Birkbeck, and Mr. Brougham, at the opening of the new lecture room, Southampton buildings, on Friday, the 8th of July, 1825* (London, 1825).



- <sup>54</sup> Claeys, 'Political Economy and Popular Education, 159.
- <sup>55</sup> A recent discussion of debates around the use of the term 'Labour Aristocracy' is provided by John Foster, 'The Aristocracy of Labour and Working-Class Consciousness Revisited' *Labour History Review* 75, 3 (2010).
- <sup>56</sup> John Foster, 'Marx, Marxism and The British Working Class Movement: Some continuing Issues for the 21st century' *Praxis - Bulletin of the Marx Memorial Library*, 155 (2012).
- <sup>57</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'A Working Men's Party' *The Labour Standard*. , July 23 1881.
- <sup>58</sup> Malcolm Chase, 'Chartism, democracy and Marx and Engels' *Theory & struggle*, 116 (2015).
- <sup>59</sup> JR Howard Roberts and Walter H Godfrey, eds., *Survey of London Volume XXI: Tottenham Court Road and Neighbourhood (The Parish of St Pancras, Part III)*, vol. 21, *Survey of London* (London, 1949), 32.
- <sup>60</sup> J. F. C. Harrison, 'The Victorian Gospel of Success' *Victorian Studies* 1, 2 (1957).
- <sup>61</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (London, 1892 [1875]), 171.
- <sup>62</sup> See <http://www.iwceducation.co.uk> and <http://post16educator.org.uk/>.
- <sup>63</sup> Colin Waugh, 'Rediscovering independent Working-Class Education' *Post-16 Educator*, 56 (2010).
- <sup>64</sup> Jim Crowther, '“Really Useful Knowledge” or “Merely Useful” Lifelong Learning?' in *Second International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, ed. David Aspin, et al., *Springer International Handbooks of Education* (2012).
- <sup>65</sup> PCES, *Economics, Education and Unlearning: Economics Education at the University of Manchester* (2014) <http://www.post-crasheconomics.com/>.