

Lifelong learning has become a key concern as the focus of educational policy has shifted from mass schooling toward the learning society. The shift started in the mid 1960s and early 1970s under the impetus of a group of writers and adult educators, gravitating around UNESCO, with a humanist philosophy and a leftist agenda. The vocabulary of that movement was appropriated in the 1990s by other interests with a very different performative agenda emphasizing effectiveness and economic outcomes. This change of interest, described in the book, has signified the death of education. *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* explores different theoretical resources to respond to this situation, mainly those that propose some restoration of an educated public or, to the contrary, individual self-creation, and uses the works of a broad range of philosophers and thinkers—notably MacIntyre, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and Baudrillard. In addition, it raises important questions about postmodern and poststructuralist responses to education in the postmodern world. Its comprehensiveness and historical background make it an essential textbook for theoretical courses in lifelong learning and in educational theory in general. A broad range of interests and subject matter make it important reading for educators, policy specialists, media specialists, researchers on the subject of lifelong learning and on the relation between education and the postmodern world, political theorists, philosophers, and philosophers of education.

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KENNETH WAIN

**THE LEARNING SOCIETY
IN A POSTMODERN WORLD**

• *The Education Crisis* •



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Introduction

This book depends on some key theses, which it assumes and discusses, and around which it is structured. First, that today's world is in a postmodern condition. Second, that lifelong learning and the learning society are key priority areas of policy interest in today's postmodern world, to a large extent displacing the modern world's focus on mass schooling. Third, that a feature of the postmodern condition is the death of education as we have understood it since the time of the Greeks, namely as a way of being an individual, as distinct from mere enculturation. Fourth, that what is called *postmodernism* threatens the existence of educational theory and, more specifically, of philosophy of education.

My narrative about how lifelong learning and the learning society became priority areas in the postmodern world occupies mainly Chapters 1, 2, and 5 of the book. It starts in the mid-1960s and early 1970s when the notion of *lifelong education* burst on the scene in the ambits of UNESCO, promoted by what could loosely be described as a movement made up of educators and educationalists of different kinds, but mainly from adult education, with a well-defined leftist political agenda. They supported the creation of a learning society with participatory democratic credentials and a scientific humanistic culture. This movement, during the two decades or so of its existence, had two strands. The first dominated up to and beyond the early 1970s when the Faure Report *Learning to be* (1972) anticipated the advent of a learning society of the future supporting individual and collective lifelong education. With the receding of these utopian aspirations in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, however, a second pragmatic strand grew more dominant within the movement. It stopped theorizing the learning society in abstract "philosophical" terms and focused on strategy instead, on the prospects for lifelong education policies in different countries.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe the educational aspirations of both strands of the movement, which petered out in the late 1980s for a number of reasons. After a break of two chapters, Chapter 5 takes up the narrative again beginning from the early 1990s to provide the background to the contemporary debate on lifelong learning and the learning society. The

background provided in the first two chapters, however, is nearly always neglected when the two subjects are discussed today. It enables one to appreciate how the movement's discourse elaborating them—or, more accurately, its vocabulary—reappropriated in the beginning of the 1990s, is distorted today from its original agenda set by the movement, hijacked by an agenda that is economic and vocationalist instead of humanist and educationist, subscribing to a different set of criteria and values (those of performativity rather than human growth), and set by very different protagonists, employers and national governments, with very different interests from those of the movement. Chapter 2, in particular, takes up this part of the narrative, which is completed in Chapter 5 where the reader is brought up to date on the most recent developments in the debate on lifelong learning, which, in Europe, has been appropriated by the European Union with its powerful Commission. Meanwhile, Chapters 1 and 2 also contain some description of the postmodern world, or the postmodern condition of the world, dwelling mainly on the existential demands made on individuals in postmodern societies that are described as “risk” societies, besides having the character of information societies in which the media are key protagonists.

A key feature of the change in discourse from the movement's to the contemporary is the substitution of the expression lifelong *education* with lifelong *learning*. This is not, in my view, an innocuous change, an innocent switch reflecting a mere change in fashion or something like that, but suggests a trend toward abandoning our normative understanding of education for the normatively neutral “learning.” It corresponds with the postmodern turn toward a nonideological world (with the collapse of any viable alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy) and with the consequent dominance of the criterion of performativity in all its affairs, including those that fall under the name of “education.” This turn of events, reflected in the decline of nonvocational adult learning everywhere in the 1990s, becomes a central preoccupation of this book, which also interprets this crisis of education as an aspect of the crisis of modernity itself. The project of modernity, child of the Enlightenment, has come under different challenges over these last decades, and I identify three very different ones as particularly relevant to my purposes—Alasdair MacIntyre's, Jurgen Habermas's, and postmodernism's. MacIntyre is an enemy of modernity, Habermas a sympathetic critic who believes in revision, postmodernism is ambiguous—the “post” in the term subject to different interpretations. Chapter 6 deals with important distinctions between postmodernism as an

ism (to be distinguished from the postmodern condition) and *poststructuralism*, the term I prefer to use instead for what the writers I am interested in (those usually labeled postmodernists, namely Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, Rorty, and so on) produce.

For MacIntyre the crisis in modern education is reflected in its inability to resolve the tension between two tasks that teachers and educational institutions from schools to universities are required to perform in our societies: that of enculturation and individuation, of preparing individuals to perform their social roles while making them independent thinkers. Rorty refers to it as the tension between the joint demands of truth and freedom. Or, put differently, from the individual's rather than society's point of view, between reassurance and freedom. This is a tension that has grown considerably in a postmodern world where risk is a crucial protagonist. MacIntyre argues that the way to resolve it is to restore the notion of an educated public to the postmodern world and to reform the university system for this purpose. His account of an educated public, his views about the university, and the more general project for a learning community developed in his work since *After Virtue* (1981), are the subject of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is devoted to the Frankfurt School theorists and to Habermas in particular. What is particularly interesting and relevant to the subject of this work in the former is their utopian dream of a rational society, which they hold out against the instrumental rationality of the developing capitalist liberal democracies of the Western world that they describe in their sociologies, influenced also by the work of Max Weber. Adorno and Horkheimer were, of course, as critical of modernity as MacIntyre and even more pessimistic of the possibility of such a society emerging under modern conditions than he was, regarding them as overwhelmingly oppressive and manipulative.

Habermas did not share their pessimism, though he shared much of their social analysis of contemporary Western societies as well as their interest in the rational society. The latter he found modeled, more or less, in the critical liberal bourgeois public that formed in the salons of Europe in the eighteenth century, the same century as the Scottish public, which MacIntyre, on his part, adopted as his model educated public. Inevitably Chapter 4 contains a comparison between these two publics, Habermas's and MacIntyre's, which, as may easily be supposed, are very different from one another. Chapter 4, however, also includes a critique of the development of the relevant aspects on Habermas's thinking following the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989a),

in which he described the rise and fall of the bourgeois public—namely, his work on communicative action and the communicative community, their link with the politics of emancipation, and the workings and role of the public and general possibility of various different publics in modern-day liberal democracies. What is especially interesting is the suggestion found in his work of the need for two kinds of publics: one general and more measured, a critical public formed at the interface between systems and lifeworld; the other, or others, emerging spontaneously from the lifeworld in response to crises experienced in the interaction between systems and lifeworld or around specific issues. Chapter 5 picks up from Chapter 4 with a discussion of the work of Stewart Ranson, who theorizes a learning democracy based largely on Habermas's work, before it turns to developments in Britain in the last years of the twentieth century as a Labour Party came to power in that country expressly committed to policies of lifelong learning and to creating a learning society with social democrat political credentials.

At this stage, I need to say something about the personal background to the writing of this book, which was intended to follow up on *Philosophy of Lifelong Education (PLE)*, which I published in 1987. That work ended with a chapter on the lifelong education movement's description of the learning society. My project when I finished that book was to write another one elaborating an *education research project* for a learning society with a *maximalist* operational approach in line with that supported by the movement (the term is explained in Chapter 1) and a social democrat political outlook. So my intentions at the time were politically quite similar to Ranson's. The notion of an education research project was elaborated in the 1987 book and is redescribed with some critical comments in Chapter 2 of this book. In Chapter 3 I show how it could perfectly well accommodate theoretical approaches to the learning society like MacIntyre's, since what I do there is re-present MacIntyre's writings as such a project. The way *PLE* proposed dealing with educational theory was to rationalize competing discourse on education, the liberal, the Marxist, the social democrat, and so on, as research projects with a well-defined role for philosophy in them. Had I continued with my original idea this book would have been finished some years ago. It would have been interesting to compare it with Ranson's work today and, more especially, with the education project of the new social democrat politics of the "Third Way" that came to define the political outlook of the British Labour Party and many other left parties in the Western world in the 1990s. At a certain stage

of writing, however, when I was working on MacIntyre and Habermas, I found myself looking at what was being said about postmodernism at the time, especially at what the postmodernists were saying. This was really already in the cards when I wrote *PLE* and used Rorty's hermeneutical account of philosophy in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (PMN)* (1980). But when I started reading up on Rorty after *PLE* I found that he had abandoned his approach in *PMN* and that his postmodernism was more pronounced. From there it was a short trip to Lyotard, then to Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard. Immediately I found my writing project challenged in several ways.

What was most evidently challenged was the methodology of an education research project. The model contemplates a "hard" ideological core that determines the normative dimension of the project and gives it its political identity; in my case, as I have been saying, being a social democrat, I intended a social democrat education project. The fashionable way to describe the contents of the core today would be as a "master narrative," and the master narratives of the modern world are greeted with skepticism in the postmodern. More seriously, poststructuralists like Foucault, whose narratives immediately captivated me, encourage us to live without master narratives *of any kind*, to "cut off the king's head," as he put it, rather than replace some old king with the new, as a sign of our postmodern ("countermodern," Foucault [1984a]) maturity. Poststructuralists in general are also skeptical of theory in general, of theoretical or constructive approaches, and my project was to construct a theory of a learning society as a strategic tool for action. Rorty has described the poststructuralist outlook as "reactive" as opposed to the constructive, and their politics as particularistic and "tactical" rather than holistic (*maximalist* in my case) and strategic. And this suggests a wholly different way of approaching the learning society than what I had contemplated—as an existing reality rather than a promise for the future. Foucault and Baudrillard are particularly interesting poststructuralists in this sense because they describe the postmodern learning society vividly in their work, the former as a policed, the latter as obscene, society. Both render the case for an educated public impossible and undesirable. Their dystopian accounts are the subject of Chapter 7. Rorty describes Foucault's politics as the politics of despair. Chapter 6, on the other hand, describes his politics of hope and that of Derrida. Both describe themselves as belonging politically to the left with the crucial difference that where Rorty gets his politics (or so he says) from Dewey, Derrida gets his from Marx.

Of the two, Rorty is more interesting for me since his self-declared business is to articulate the evolving vocabulary of a new liberal-social democrat utopia as he sees it emerging within the left's political discourse in the postmodern world.

Does it in any way resemble the political project for a new social democracy promised by the Third Way social democrats, whose vision of a learning society is also described in Chapter 5? The question is a complex one, but interestingly the new social democrats also find it more comfortable to live without a hard ideological core for their project and prefer to describe their politics within a center that is fluid, not a synthesis of some sort of left and right, but a creative way of recasting the left, which is also what the poststructuralists of the left are after. While Rorty describes himself as an orthodox social democrat reformist, Foucault and Baudrillard are uninterested in situating themselves politically either way. The latter pronounces himself uninterested in politics altogether, the former as interested in politics in a different way. Baudrillard is a thoroughgoing nihilist with a narcissistic outlook who seeks an ecstatic identification with "the object." Foucault can be described as a "weak anarchist," as Todd May calls him, both in his political outlook, which is suspicious of power relations, and in his tactical approach, which engages in politics at the microlevel and aims to subvert relations of dominance and manipulation where these exist. More generally Foucault is concerned with the workings of power in the construction of modern societies, analyzing them in his genealogies. Foucault's is a politics of combat and suspicion rather than despair. It is suspicious particularly of projects intended to establish the ideal conditions for a politics of consensus, like those of Habermas and Gadamer. It focuses its suspicion on postmodern learning societies, suggesting that the kind of work we should do on them is not theoretical or utopian but genealogical; mapping out the economics of power within them, with the ultimate object of unmasking their repressive features and freeing individuals to create their own self-individuating projects.

Indeed, the *ethos* Foucault encourages, unlike Derrida, is individualist, and the same is true of Rorty and Baudrillard, though their individualism is different from his. Rorty and Foucault both encourage an ethics of self-creation, though where Rorty's notion of self-creation is essentially Sartre's, Foucault's is Nietzsche's. Baudrillard's, on the other hand, is an ethics not of self-creation but of self-destruction. This is what renders it nihilistic where Foucault's is not. Both Rorty and Foucault propose individual self-creation rather than the reconstitution of educated publics

as their response to the question of education in our postmodern world, though even here, the way they deal with the tension between enculturation and individuation raised by that question is very different. Rather than propose their synthesis in a public, Rorty advocates their separation into distinct activities and practices, distinct stages of life, *different institutions*—the first, enculturation, being the proper task of schooling, the second, individuation, of the nonvocational university. Foucault does not deal directly with the idea of identifying schooling with enculturation, so one does not know how attractive he would have found it. Foucault was very concerned with how enculturation works in our societies, with how we are made *subjects*, as he puts it, by different economies of disciplinary power. Thus, in the Nietzschean manner (and unlike Rorty), he identifies self-refusal, the refusal of aspects of one's subjectification, as indispensable for self-creation, which lies beyond the indispensable commitment to self-care. Identifying lifelong education with the individual's ongoing self-creation is, however, undoubtedly taking it out of the remit of schooling. A culture of self-care in the sense of individual self-dependence, economic and vocational, lies at the heart of the Third Way's social philosophy. It is also identified as the key object of lifelong learning in the current discourse of the European Union. Foucault, however, understands care for self differently, tying it to a project of being rather than having, to draw on Fromm's famous distinction, and drawing on an understanding of the expression that goes back to antiquity. Self-creation is also very different for Foucault than it is for Rorty, since the latter envisages it as an entirely private matter, its irony unsuitable for public life, while the former wants to carry it into the public sphere and does not countenance Rorty's radical distinction between public and private self.

Rorty believes that philosophy, though it could contribute to one's private self-creation, has nothing to say to the citizen, since it has nothing to say to politics. He also says that it has nothing to say to education as a public enterprise, thus denying the need for a philosophy of education. This view has created other difficulties for me in writing this book, as not only was my notion of an education research project challenged but also my own self-perception as a philosopher of education (a label, to be honest, that I have always felt uncomfortable with). In the hermeneutic "postphilosophical culture" he describes in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982:xxix), Rorty replaces philosophers with all-purpose intellectuals with "no special 'problems' to solve, nor any special 'method' to apply,"

who “abided by no particular disciplinary standards,” and “had no collective self-image as a ‘profession.’” Perceiving oneself as an intellectual also implies a willingness to play some sort of public role in one’s society. But his proposal comes at a time when the intellectual’s role in a postmodern world, cast as the universal intellectual at home in the modern world, is threatened by the figure of the *imagologue*, as Kundera calls her. Views like Kundera’s that the intellectual is dead are shared by many, and are responded to in different ways by Habermas, Foucault, MacIntyre, and others in the book. Again I feel myself drawn to Foucault’s description of the specific intellectual and the role he assigns to her in public life. But Kundera raises a more general question than that of the intellectual’s future or, better still, frames the question within the more general one about the role of the media (which turns out to be crucial in several ways) in shaping the postmodern learning society. Much space is given to this concern in the book, mainly via the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, Baudrillard, and Gianni Vattimo.

Finally, with respect to the future of the education research project, as I wrote earlier it is not a notion or tool that will interest the poststructuralist. Do I now, therefore, think it useless? One of the many things that have interested me in Rorty’s work is his suggestion that often it is not a question of choosing between one thing and another, of deciding what to keep and what to abandon, whether to be a constructive philosopher or a reactive intellectual, whether to be theoretical or subversive, but of realizing that the alternatives can and need to be put to different purposes. Rorty contends that both creative and reactive discourses are required, and that reactive discourse is perforce reactive to *something*, something that is itself constructive. Constructive discourse, theory, will always be needed by those who are concerned with making policies and setting up programs or projects in the name of public education. For these, I believe, the education research project could still be a useful tool, and philosophers could still indulge in their traditional work of justification and critique. For those, on the other hand, who have to submit to policies, programs, and projects that are made for them by others, or who, as specific intellectuals, work with those who submit, the story is different.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Lifelong Education Movement: The Learning Society as Utopia

The Challenge of Lifelong Education

I first came across the idea of a learning society in the late 1970s when I took an interest in the phenomenon of lifelong education as an emerging concept, started teaching a course on the subject in the teacher education program at the University of Malta, and decided to make it the subject of my Ph.D. research.¹ The literature I read at the time in connection with my research, and which saw its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s, had as its point of departure the claim that education in the second half of the twentieth century is in a state of deep crisis, a claim that both struck and convinced me. It identified this crisis as the failure of our contemporary education systems and practices to adapt to the demands of a fast-changing world, argued that in such a world they are facing the threat of obsolescence, and claimed that the sensible response to this threat is to promote lifelong learning for all. In the early 1960s UNESCO formally announced lifelong education as the “master concept” for the planning and programming of education for the second half of the twentieth century.² Gradually, my attention began to focus on a group of writers on the subject who were operating within, or were sponsored by, UNESCO and were interested not merely in lifelong learning but in the more radical reconceptualization of the whole of education as a lifelong process. They thus distinguished it from other terms also circulating at the time that confused lifelong learning with adult or even professional education. With the passing of time this body of writers had acquired enough consistency and unity of thought and purpose to qualify as a movement, though only in the loosest sense, since they never actually banded themselves as a movement.

The movement emphasized the universality and ancient lineage of the idea of lifelong education. Its presence in a diversity of cultures, they argued, has acted as a civilizing force, and thus as a value inherent to human life and experience. Besides the liberal and humanist tradition of the West, where it was captured in the thoughts of writers like Comenius, Matthew Arnold, and John Dewey, it appeared in Islam, where the Koran exhorts the faithful to learn from the cradle to the grave, and in ancient Chinese, Indian, and Greek traditions as well. This universality of the notion more or less justified UNESCO's concern with it as a global organization.³ Bogdan Suchodolski (1979:38), one of the movement's foremost pioneers, attributed to Comenius the writing of the first treatise on lifelong education. But the movement in general identified its own modern, socially conscious, egalitarian "doctrine of lifelong education" more immediately with the memorandum connected with the report of the Adult Education Committee of the United Kingdom, published in 1919, which had concluded that in the new postwar world, "Adult education is not a luxury for a limited, exclusive group of specially selected individuals, but an integral part of social life," and should, therefore, "be made available for all as well as be made permanent" (Dave 1976:58). Quoting from the same memorandum, F.W. Jessup (1969:18) noted that besides linking lifelong learning with the ideal of national economic recovery, the report had an explicit political agenda: cultivating "a new spirit of assertion among the rank-and-file" through the exercise of their democratic responsibilities, and responding to "the need for a far wider body of intelligent public opinion." These were concerns that were also taken up and articulated by the writers of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s. But Suchodolski (1976:58) identified A.B. Yeaxlee's *Lifelong Education* (1929) as the first to address these issues seriously and try to work out what they could mean in terms of practical policies. Yeaxlee was already speaking about the growing demand for "education as a lifelong process" in Britain in 1920 (Field 2001:5). In France the concept of lifelong education began to take shape in the 1930s "in the hands of the philosopher Bachelard," but was not adopted in educational circles until after World War II (Furter 1977:13).⁴

The importance of the fast-decreasing time span of change and its impact on education that so struck the writers of the movement had already been identified and highlighted in the 1930s by A.N. Whitehead (Dave 1976:15). By the 1960s, when the notion of lifelong education burst on the scene, this phenomenon of fast-accelerating change had taken new and different forms and global proportions, creating urgent challenges and

infiltrating the world of politics and culture, as well as the social and economic world, where it had its most immediate impact. What was particularly remarkable about it were its speed and permeability, its rate and penetration into the everyday lives of ordinary people. In such a situation, as Paul Lengrand (1975:16) pointed out, “the notion that man can accomplish his life-span with a given set of intellectual and technical luggage is fast disappearing,” and we are faced with the necessity of lifelong learning. Lengrand conceded that change has always been a challenge for humanity but argued that the difference today was that it had modified the very terms of individual and community fate, rendering the actions of the world both more complex and more involved, and jeopardizing the traditional patterns of explanation for coming to terms with them. In short, it threatened people with *anomie*, with becoming strangers in the world they inhabit. The challenges he identified were those created by a growing demand for democratic citizenship in the political field; by the explosion of information technology, which has given our civilization a planetary character but which also requires a more discriminating selection because of the quality of its products; by the growth of leisure time and its use; by the “crisis” in patterns of life and in relationships as well as in ideologies; and by the changing perception of the human body, including the place that sexuality has come to play in our culture. This is no different from the way social theorists describe today’s challenges. Against them, Lengrand described educational systems as characterized by only very fractional links with life, by nearly complete isolation from concrete realities, by a rift between enjoyment and “education,” and by a nearly total absence of a political culture of dialogue and participation.

Education and the Problem of Change

The importance of the impact of the fast-changing world on everyday life has grown, if anything, in the estimation of social theorists. In 1992, Barry Smart (1992:1) was arguing like Lengrand that change “constitutes an increasingly prominent aspect of modern life,” that it “might be regarded as the defining feature” of modern times in that it “radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of experience,” and that it has become an increasingly dramatic reality for ordinary people and societies. In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony