

Looking forward backwards: Varieties of capitalisms, alternative futures, and learning landscapes

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Abstract

Critiques of capitalism have constituted the backbone of political economies addressing living, working, and learning conditions in a variety of forms of capitalism. This paper explores different approaches to representations of the future of (adult) education in capitalist Europe. It examines the 1960s and 1970s as a period when rapid technological change was addressed in studies of the future of Europe by proponents of post-industrial society, New Left public intellectuals, professional futurologists, and critics of late capitalism. These studies envisaged quite different futures for both society and organised adult learning. Attention is subsequently focused on the pan-European project Educating Man for the 21st Century during the early 1970s which envisaged the future as 'neo-industrial/neo-capitalist society' in the year 2000. In conclusion, the paper offers a critical account of early encounters with neoliberal politics during the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly the cultural materialist work of Raymond Williams.

Keywords: alternative futures, cultural practices, utopias, dystopias, futuribles

Introduction

From a historical perspective, the oft-forgotten world of utopias and dystopias as cultural narratives of the future has been a continuing source of collective inspiration for creating and sustaining radical cultural repertoires, particularly those of organised workers' and women's movements, in envisaging possible emancipatory or repressive consequences of future developments, including organised adult learning. Indeed, the history of organised adult learning has been characterised by repertoires that constituted critical, if not radically subversive, reflexive cultural practices (Allison, 2018; Bellamy, 1888; Hake, 2017; Morris, 1890; Peters & Freeman-Moir, 2006; Thompson, 1963; Williams, 1978, 1981, 1983). The theoretical understanding of 'organised adult learning' adopted here



addresses these richly diverse cultural practices in terms of a political economy of communication and learning during the ‘long revolution’ of modernisation (Fuchs, 2017; Shapiro, 1982; Williams, 1961, 1966, 1981).

Historically, these cultural practices have been socially organised in diverse cultural formations, movements, and institutions only some of which are readily recognised as institutionalised ‘adult education’ provision (Williams, 1961, 1977, 1981; 2011, 2018). They have also found expression in widely different formulations of the future of organised adult learning; indeed, the study of ‘alternative educational futures’ (Hake, 1973; Bengtsson et al., 1975; Livingstone, 1983). Castoriadis’s (1975) original work on the cultural construction of collective ‘social imaginaries’ has contributed more recently to interest in collective cultural representations of societal and educational alternative futures for contemporary neoliberal repertoires (Beckert, 2016; Brown, Rappert & Webster, 2000; Milojevic, 2005; Rahm, 2019; Taylor, 2004; Tett & Hamilton, 2019). This involves a ‘cultural political economy’ (Sum & Jessop, 2015) perspective on economic, political, communal, and cultural imaginaries, which addresses the social organisation of the production, dissemination, reception, indeed active acquisition, of ‘images of society’ (Williams, 1961, p. 120-142). More specifically, attention will focus here on the socially organised production and dissemination of cultural representations of social and educational futures constructed by collective actors in partisan public spheres (Castoriadis, 1975; Habermas, 1962; Steele, 2007; Thompson, 1963).

This paper explores how different approaches to the future of (adult) education in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of rapid scientific and technological change, addressed the future society and organised adult learning. It focuses respectively on debates involving ‘prospective’ studies of the future, notions of ‘cultural democracy’ among New Left public intellectuals, the work of professional ‘futurologists’, and varieties of Marxist critiques of late capitalism. Attention subsequently turns to studies of the future-within the pan-European project, *Educating Man for the 21st Century*. In conclusion, the paper offers an historical analysis of early encounters with neoliberal politics during the 1970s and early 1980s, which is focused on the cultural materialist critique formulated by Raymond Williams with reference to the impact of emergent neoliberal thinking and practices on representations of communication and learning landscapes.

Disparate responses to post-war capitalist crises

Growing concerns with post-war structural inequalities in western capitalist societies have been traced to closure during the 1970s of the ‘glorious thirty’ years of economic growth, prosperity, and educational opportunity (Atkinson & Piketty, 2007; Collier, 2018; Grusky & Maclean, 2016; Levinson, 2016; Piketty, 2014, 2020). On the one hand, post-war Western Europe was characterised by economic growth, technological innovation, particularly automation, reduced working hours, rising incomes, and bourgeoisification of affluent workers (Galbraith, 1958; Lockwood, 1960; Zweig, 1961; Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer & Platt, 1968). On the other hand, despite the post-war expansion of educational opportunities in secondary schooling, particularly raising the school leaving age, from the late 1950s, there was evidence of growing structural educational inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970; Floud, Halsey & Martin, 1957; Glass, 1954; Woodin, McCulloch & Cowan, 2013). In seeking to resolve these contradictory tendencies, social and educational policies pursued the transformation of capitalist industrial economies towards post-industrial societies in conjunction with reforming the architecture of post-initial education. Policies pursued also sought to meet popular

educational movements' aspirations favouring long lives of learning with policy repertoires promoting different understandings of *éducation permanente* (Arents, 1959; Hake, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Throughout the 1960s, however, policy landscapes in Western Europe were marked by grass-roots activity articulating discontent with capitalist society, administrative bureaucracy, democratic deficits, and the failure of initial formal education to provide equal opportunities for individual personal development and collective social emancipation. In both Western and Eastern Europe, discontent with (adult) education was articulated by broad based coalitions comprising left-wing political parties, trade unions, students, women's groups, and community-led organisations. Social-democratic reform agendas addressed second chance and second way opportunities for adults to acquire qualifications by broadening access to long lives of learning.

Worldwide, this discontent was accompanied by a crisis of confidence in formal schooling. UNESCO's 1967 Williamsburg world conference, which was addressed by President Johnson, discussed a report by the International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) on the world crisis in education (Coombes, 1968). This report proposed that intergovernmental organisations and nation states should adopt non-formal education as the proto neoliberal 'necessary future' required for education to meet labour market needs of capitalist economic development (Bock & Papagiannis, 1975). At a more esoteric level, apocalyptic narratives, including *Compulsory Miseducation*, *School is Dead*, *De-schooling Society*, *Crisis in the Classroom*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, offered diagnoses of global cultural crisis in education. Does education have a future? (Bengtsson et al., 1975a), became a question posed by many of education's critical advocates.

While the still distant year 2000 did not yet generate a sense of *fin de siècle*, these different understandings of crises inherent to both capitalist society and institutionalised education contributed to diverse approaches to rethinking the future development of both society and organisation of (adult) learning. In this transnational environment, four major ideological formations constituted sources of 'guiding images' for alternative futures: a) 'prospective' studies of rapid technological change; b) cultural democracy of the New Left; c) technocratic forecasts of 'post-industrial society', and d) neo-Marxist interpretations of 'late capitalism'.

Prospective studies of rapid technological change and éducation permanente

During the late 1950s and 1960s, French policies favouring *éducation permanente* stimulated policy debates addressing alternative architectures to replace traditional front-loaded systems of initial formal education. Systematic reflection on futures for organised (adult) learning became evident among a coalition of French progressive public and private employers, senior civil servants, and public intellectuals, who embraced *éducation permanente* in response to rapid advances in scientific knowledge and technological change (Hake, 2018, 2019). Informed by Gaston Berger's theory of the *accélération* of history and work of *Centre International de Prospective*—created by Berger in 1957 together with the journal *Prospective*—they promoted *études prospectives* of possible futures particularly with reference to social and educational consequences of scientific and technical change (Berger, 1962, 1967). Leading spokesmen for this milieu—at the Ministry of Education Berger was head of higher education, while Jean Capelle (1966) was responsible for reform of secondary education—called for an entirely new architecture for French public education advocating radical proposals involving 'permanent education'.

Given their analysis of dirigisme in public and private enterprises, rapid innovation, particularly automation, persistent skill shortages, structural unemployment, and decline of traditional industries, this future-oriented policy repertoire articulated radical changes to education and training. Including executives of public and private enterprises (Hartung, 1966; Vatier, 1960), this futures repertoire demanded far-reaching state intervention to radically reform the entire French initial education system; expansion of post-initial education; and strengthening in-company training within both public and private enterprises. Many ideas and practices associated with French policies on *éducation permanente* influenced not only national and intergovernmental policymaking, with appointment of experts, advisory committees, and policy reports, they also fuelled critical left-wing proposals for democratic social and cultural policies. Following Berger's untimely death in 1960, the Ford Foundation sponsored Bertrand de Jouvenal's 1961 international committee for study of so-called *futuribles* (De Jouvenal, 1964), and activities of the *Futuribles International Association* in 1967.

Cultural democracy and the New Left

During the temporary East-West ideological détente of the 1960s, New Left public intellectuals in western Europe, among them Abendroth, Bottomore, Fromm, Marcuse, and Williams, together with socialist humanists in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia, including Marković, Petrović, Schaff, and Suchodolski (1961, 1965), demonstrated common interests in '...a permanent education of a democratic and popular kind' (Williams, 1966, p. 15), as a cultural force for radical humanist social change. Focusing on egalitarian democracy, cultural citizenship, and personal development as related projects, these networks articulated progressive cultural responses to rapid transformation of societies and cultures, including the Yugoslavian-inspired reorganisation of working life as a democratic self-managed activity (Garaudy, 1969). These cultural democratic repertoires articulated egalitarian policies focused on a 'polytechnical' conception of socialisation and 'out-of-school' learning stressing development of collective cultural capacities for creating the *future* rather propagating 'instrumental skills' and individual adaptation to labour markets (Richta, 1969). Future society was regarded as demanding cultural citizenship where 'citizens' have access to democratic education, a pluralistic public sphere, and a 'social state' promoting the common welfare (Williams, 1966).

Cultural repertoires of permanent education advocating participatory democracy included collectively organised access to mass media, libraries, radio, film, and television as 'public media'. Critical grassroot cultural movements in working-class neighbourhoods focused a militant 'public pedagogy' involving mobilisation repertoires featuring collective sites for community learning based on popular literacy work via writers' workshops and community-based publishing (Hassenforder, 1963; Woodin, 2018). Imaginary futures rooted in grass-roots social activism and egalitarian cultural democracy in 1968 ranged from progressive social discontinuity practices (Willener, 1970), political disruption of everyday routines (Morin, Lefort & Castoriadis, 1968; Touraine, 1968), and Maoist political imageries (Wolin, 2010), through 'democratic' aspirations opposing authoritarian regimes in Greece, Portugal and Spain, together with the Prague Spring's socialist reform critique of Soviet Russian repression, and the *May Day Manifesto* (Williams, 1968) as sources of democratic cultural renewal.

Social-technological forecasts of 'post-industrial society'

Both the critical cultural analysis of New Left public intellectuals, together with studies of 1960s counterculture (Reich, 1968; Roszak, 1969; Toffler, 1970), were regarded with marked disdain by those engaged in constructing 'surprise-free' futures of capitalist society that focused on the implications of unfettered technological change (Kahn & Briggs, 1972; Kahn & Weiner, 1967). Possibilities of social rupture were regarded as avoidable by eradicating remaining pockets of poverty, deprivation, and disadvantage through the social spin-offs of continuous economic growth in 'post-industrial society' (Bell, 1967, 1973, 1976; Fourastié, 1965). In combination with the 'end of ideology' thesis (Bell, 1959), it was argued that social conflicts would give way to a socio-technological future based on service industries and proliferation of higher education. Primacy of scientific knowledge and technological change as the driving future social development, including the original reference to 'knowledge society' (Machlup, 1962), constituted influential imaginaries of societal and educational futures (Ferkiss, 1969). For Touraine (1969), post-industrial society was a 'programmed society' emerging from technocratic modernisation characterised by technological innovation, automation, and growth of distributive, financial and information services. Bell's and Touraine's studies envisaged post-industrial society as a 'surprise-free future' involving the potential convergence of capitalist and socialist societies driven by the scientific and technological revolution. Common East-West representations of technical efficiency and rational organisation of production and consumption were fuelled by shared notions of an emergent socio-technological imaginary of a self-regulating cybernetic culture (Garaudy, 1969; Richta, 1969). This transformation was characterised by economic restructuring involving demise of heavy industries together with rapid technological innovation, particularly automation, and expanding distributive and financial services, while Bell's notion of 'information economies' was increasingly regarded as marking post-industrial societies. In this ideological context, the concept of knowledge industries referred to the complex of education, research and development, mass media, information technologies and services, which accounted in the US for 29% of GNP by 1959 (Machlup, 1962). This had fundamental implications for the '...way economic and social exchanges are conducted, the way knowledge is created and retrieved, and the character of work and occupations' (Bell, 1973, p. 14). Indeed, the notion of 'post-industrial' society as an 'information economy' was based on markets involving messages as commodities, with 'work' and 'communication' viewed as synonymous (Hayashi, 1970; Heilbroner, Morley, Frankel & Glazer, 1974). This was the presupposition of quasi-utopias such as *Teg's 1994: An Anticipation of the Near Future* (Theobald & Scott, 1972).

Neo-capitalism becomes late capitalism

While French and Belgian Marxists referred to 'neo-capitalism' (Gorz, 1964; Mandel, 1964; Michelsen, 1969), the Frankfurt school argued that society was increasingly marked by the exploitive social relations of 'late capitalism' (Habermas, 1968; Marcuse, 1969). In his 1968, presidential address to the Federal German sociological association, Adorno questioned whether 'industrial capitalism' continued to dominate, albeit in modified forms, or whether it was being replaced by 'late capitalist' social formations. Late capitalism referred to the historical epoch since 1940, which, contrary to leftist prognoses, included the post-war economic expansion from 1945 to 1975, and subsequent international recession. Mandel (1972) also subsequently adopted 'late capitalism' to refer to the survival of post-war capitalism, while, Habermas, however,

sought to identify structural transformations as sources of crisis in late capitalism with his focus on its strategic vulnerability in the sphere of politics rather than in the economic sphere. *Legitimation Crisis* (Habermas, 1973) examined how the late capitalist states sought to maintain its legitimacy in the context of growing state power, reduced class conflict, and declining class consciousness, particularly among the working class. More libertarian Marxists, including aesthetic situationists (Debord, 1967) and eco-socialists (Bahro, 1977; Gorz, 1973; Marcuse, 1972), developed a critique of advanced capitalism's combination of information technologies, exploitive consumption, environmental concerns, and expanding structures for surveillance in 'authoritarian capitalist' social formations. A fundamental challenge for the left was a future capitalism characterised by internationalisation of capital, rise of multinational corporations, and global finance in late capitalist social formations. This required accounting for the hegemonic influence of global oligarchies in determining social applications of advanced technologies in information-based economies.

Towards Europe 2000: surprise-free or alternative futures?

In addressing political, social, and cultural consequences of rapid economic and technological change, the new profession of 'futurology' enjoyed strong organisational support among foundations, such as Ford, Rand, and Hudson, together with intergovernmental and transnational organisations, while significant resources were pumped into futures research, albeit of a 'non-bourgeois' variety (Bengtsson et al, 1975, p. 5), in Eastern Europe (Kumar, 1972). Financed largely by global corporate sponsors, including Shell International, Unilever, and the Gulbenkian Foundation, institutionalised futures research served the reconstruction of industrial economies on the road to post-industrial societies and information economies. In projects such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Year 2000, established in 1965 (Bell & Graubard, 1968), the *Polska 2000* commission chaired by Suchodolski (Andersson, 2018), and Plan Europe 2000, the year 2000 became a symbolic marker of transformation from industrial towards post-industrial society and information-based economies (Galtung & Stoetzel, 1970; Jungk & Galtung, 1969).

Surprise-free futures

Launched by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in 1968, Plan Europe 2000 comprised four projects devoted respectively to education, industry, urbanisation, and agriculture, historically the four pillars of European modernisation, with ECF's project *Educating Man for the 21st Century* addressed the future organisation of education in Europe in the year 2000. This project recruited *éminences grises* on the European circuit to a Scientific Committee supervising projects addressing specific aspects of future education, all well-established peripatetic scholar-consultants in comparative education on inter-governmental and transnational circuits including UNESCO, IIEP, OECD, Council of Europe (CoE), and European Economic Community (EEC). Involved in predicting future trends in education with the Swedish Board of Education (Husén, 1970), Thorsten Husén, for example, became involved in Plan Europe 2000 (Husén, 1974), and contributed, in the early 1970s, to OECD reports on alternative futures for educational systems (Husén 1972; OECD, 1972). Henri Janne, chair of ECF's education project, was a renowned sociologist, ex-Minister of Education in Belgium, chair of CoE's project on permanent education (Janne, 1969), author of EEC's 1973 report on education policies

(Janne, 1973), and submitted expert papers for OECD, and UNESCO's Faure committee (Hake, 2017). Most studies commissioned by Plan Europe 2000 adopted variations on the theme of 'surprise-free' future development towards varieties of capitalist 'social welfare' societies (Benveniste & Benson, 1975; Borghi, 1974; Husén, 1974; Poignant, 1973; Reuchlin, 1972; Sauvy, 1973; Deurinck, 1974; Schwartz, 1974).

Alternative futures

The exceptions to this dominant pattern were studies by Jensen (1972), Hake (1972, 1975), Visalberghi (1973), Bengtsson et al (1975a, 1975b, 1975c), which adopted a distinctive methodology for constructing 'alternative futures' for societal and educational development (Hake, 1973). These studies constructed futures based on macro-sociological alternatives for economic, political, communal, and cultural structures. Economic structures concerned the means of production and distribution, thus enabling statements about economic production and how economic activity is regulated. Political structures involved political processes, forms of decision-making, and patterns of political communication. Communal structures related to allocation of status, social roles, working life and leisure time, and organisation of households. Cultural structures entailed the socialisation and resocialisation practices centred on involving the creation and maintenance of meaning and belief systems, and the social organisation of dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and sensitivities.

Regarding the alternative futures they constructed, these studies differed significantly. Jensen (1972) identified three *futuribles* (De Jouvenel, 1964) referred to as: a) a 'Neo-Capitalist' future based on surprise-free development of the capitalist economic system (Kahn & Wiener, 1967); b) a 'Welfare' future focused on political priority of collective provisions ensuring equality of opportunity (Gross, 1966); and c) a 'New Culture' focused on the future involving continuous creation of new cultural meaning systems (Marcuse, 1969). Hake (1972), however, applied Galtung's (1970) distinction between individualist-collectivist and hierarchical-egalitarian societies in an exploration of the social organisation of collectivist-egalitarian cultural practices based on libertarian Marxist pedagogies (Read, 1963), and proletarian revolutionary praxis of 'cultural enlightenment' (Fitzpatrick, 1970). This theoretical framework was subsequently applied by Bengtsson et al. (1975a, 1975b, 1975c) in a report which established a distinction between surprise-free, crisis, critical, and constructive futures in different approaches to the study of the future (Bengtsson et al., 1975: pp. 3-13).

Originally intended as an integration of the major findings of ECF's education project, this report presented four alternatives societal and educational futures for the year 2000 at ECF's 1972 European conference in York (Centeno, 2011). This 'ginger group' of young social scientists and educators presented a critical analysis of two hierarchical societal futures manifesting 'Neo-Industrial' and 'Social Welfare' varieties of Western capitalism, which they contrasted with 'Voluntary Collective' and 'Compulsory Collective' varieties of state and associational socialism/communism. Entitled *Does Education Have A Future? The Political Economy of Social and Educational Inequalities in European Society*, this 'controversial' report (Centeno, 2011, p. 139) concluded that growing social inequalities in European societies during the early 1970s pointed to a capitalist 'neo-industrial' society as the most likely future of Europe in the year 2000. Contrary to ECF's institutionalised expectations, this report crucially argued that 'permanent education' in neo-industrial society would be geared to producing a labour force capable of meeting the occupational requirements of a capitalist neo-industrial future. As such, it constituted an ideology critique of the contradictions arising from the

otherwise unquestioned social practices characteristic of methodology of ‘surprise-free’ futures (Bengtsson, et. al., 1975; Claisse & Delvenne, 2015; Guigou, 1972; Hake, 1973).

Following the York ‘debate’, subsequent Plan Europe 2000 reports were informed by the hegemonic normative future of hierarchical social welfare societies as the surprise-free societal future (Emmerij, 1974; Fragnière, 1976; Hall, 1977; Janne, 1976). These studies explicitly rejected discussion of transition, let alone questions of transformation and political strategies, to other possible futures. In sharp contrast, Bengtsson et al., (1975) emphasised that their ‘alternative futures’ were based upon the evidence of historical analysis of ideological representations of socially organised adult learning in European societies, which constituted alternative political strategies for dealing with growing social inequalities in the early 1970s. Furthermore, political responses to the 1973 oil crisis signalled that the end of the ‘glorious thirty’ years of post-war prosperity would be associated with austerity measures when the social organisation of neo-industrial/neo-capitalist economies was increasingly informed by putative neoliberal political repertoires. By the late-1970s, there was clear evidence that nascent economic deregulation of markets entailed regulatory regimes focusing on efficiency and performance indicators, while emergent neoliberal cultural formations were refocused on enhancing individual employability.

Towards 2000: A short history of the future, 1945-1983

As a marker of changing structural, institutional, and aspirational landscapes, the year 2000 has featured in utopian and dystopian accounts of the social organisation society and learning from quite different ideological sources in widely differing epochs. Among socialist representations of the future, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* (Bellamy, 1888) narrated the experiences of Julian West, who falls into a deep sleep in 1887 to subsequently re-awake in the year 2000 to find that capitalism has been abolished and a socialist society established. Critical of Bellamy’s narrative of an almost mechanical transition to a socialist future, Raymond Williams (1978) agreed with William Morris (1890), in his literary answer to Bellamy in *News from Nowhere*, that transition to utopia is neither discovered, encountered, nor projected, but it must be fought for. In other words, utopias constitute histories of revolutionary praxis during proletarian struggles under capitalism (Hake, 2017).

While periodisation remains a recurring problematic in the historiography of post-war organised adult learning, these historical narratives of struggles, with their rich imaginaries of radical proletarian praxis, have largely disappeared from the literature on organised adult learning and social movements since the 1980s. Well aware of Walter Benjamin’s analysis of ‘left-wing melancholia’ during the 1930s (Traverso, 2016), Williams engaged critically with its re-emergence during the 1970s and 1980s in relation to the sense of historic failure prevalent among social democratic, socialist, and communist parties confronted by expanding neoliberal repertoires (McGuigan, 2019). Seeking to maintain a relational continuity with subversive engagements in the past, Williams contributed to a critical cultural formation supporting oppositional practices in the face of active dissolution of the democratic practice of permanent education.

Recent critiques of neoliberal hegemony by some academics associated with adult education have contributed, however, to a nostalgic orthodoxy involving revisiting the promise of lifelong education during the 1970s. Among a faction of these specialised intellectuals, this tendency involves engaging in celebration of the Faure Commission’s report *Learning to be* (Faure et al., 1972), together with the ‘political utopia’ of lifelong

education as embraced by UNESCO (Barros, 2012; Biesta, 2006; Boshier, 1997; Elfert, 2018; Milana, 2012). This myth-making exercise fails to recognise that the short life of lifelong education during the 1970s historically marked the swan song of thirty years of co-operation between social democratic parties and global capitalism's drive to reform both itself and society during the post-war transformation of industrial capitalism towards post-industrial society. When recollecting the '...international "magnificent seven" led by Edgar Faure' (Bengtsson et al., 1975a: p. 122)—this new orthodoxy has projected Faure himself as a French socialist politician (Elfert, 2018), thus suggesting a 'socialist imaginary' of lifelong education at work, for which no evidence is provided. Faure was, however, a Gaullist right-of-centre career politician, who later refused office in coalitions with the Socialist Party. In this manner, the new orthodoxy fails to recognise that Faure's report was rejected in radical libertarian and left-wing circles during the 1970s (Guigou, 1975), but then myths do not draw their influence from facts. This reaffirms, as Chase (1996, p. 53) reminded us, that Williams considered much of what passes for theory in adult education is an '...extraordinary combination of sectarianism, special pleading, mythmaking...' (Williams, 1959, p. 750); the dead hand of inalienable privilege.

In comparison with this myth-making and absence of visionary imagination in the 21st century, Williams' own critical oeuvre from the early 1960s constituted a rigorous cultural materialist analysis of the neoliberal cultural formation together with a critique of its emergent policy repertoires geared to dismantling all vestiges of permanent education associated with the practice of cultural democracy. Originally conceived as the sequel to his *The Long Revolution* (Williams, 1961), Raymond Williams (1983) used *Towards 2000* to offer a radical democratic reinterpretation of post-war social change and cultural practices (Jones, 2006; McGuigan, 2019). He sought to question simplistic understandings of post-war reconstruction from 1945 to 1975, *Les Trente Glorieuses* (Fourastié, 1979), as a period of unprecedented beneficence and well-being, emergence of affluent workers, leisure-time, and consumer society. Williams made it clear that following massive economic, political, social, and cultural disorganisation generated by the Second World War, post-war educational reforms in Western Europe constituted political responses to challenges confronting governments and citizens in rapidly changing societies. These were also societies engaged in learning to deal not only with material and immaterial ravages of war, but with loss of empire, wars of independence and decolonisation, post-colonial migration to erstwhile metropolitan states, and Cold War geo-politics. Furthermore, Williams provided a necessary corrective reminder that post-1945 'welfare capitalism' was the long-term product of often-violent struggles by the organised working class to secure decent working hours, living conditions, health care, and education in the 19th century, and that it was vital to secure their maintenance in the second half of the 20th century in the face of neoliberal austerity repertoires.

Williams used *Towards 2000* to position his critical analysis of post-war tendencies in cultural practices in relation to the often hesitant and disorganised struggles of a disintegrating 'left' when confronted by the neoliberal social formation, multinational corporations co-operating with the European Union as a market, nation-states embracing pro-market domestic policies, and cultural practices manifesting the hegemony of capitalist consumption (Milner, 2010). Re-reading Williams is also a reminder of the critique of the 'prospective ideology' at the root of Plan Europe 2000, which was marked by the absence of critical reflection and utopian imagination (Gigou, 1972). Williams (1978) argued the significant difference between use of 'imagination' to connote: a) speculation about the future which reproduces existing structures in externally altered circumstances, and b) deliberate and sustained thought about possible futures, which both precedes and succeeds recognition of commitment to take 'another path'. According to

Andersson (2018), ‘establishment futurology’ as practised by Plan Europe 2000, constituted a mode of analysis that does not tolerate envisaging how the present and future of education and training practices can be other than those envisaged these responsible for the present. This prepared the ideological soil for imminent neoliberal occupation of the future, in other words a world which knows no past nor future, no history nor vision: all that is possible is the day-to-day preoccupation with the precariousness of the present (Guigou, 1972; Bengtsson et al., 1975a; Bourdieu, 1998).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Williams’ critical work on material cultural forms focused on the long-term historical transformation of capitalism and the social organisation of mediated culture, with particular reference to ‘communication and learning’ (Williams, 1961, 1977, 1981). This led him to investigate neoliberal repertoires in relation to the commodification and marketisation of mass media, leisure-time consumption, and the cultural practices characteristic of participation in organised adult learning. In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams, 1974), he analysed the social conditions of cultural production and circulation in relation to increasing domestic consumption of radio and television by households (Bengtsson et al., 1975a, p. 46-48; Jensen, 1972, p. 75). With the term ‘mobile privatisation’, Williams argued that the collapsing distinction between work and leisure in the 1970s was key to understanding the growing significance of neoliberal markets in serving the private home as the key spatial-temporal location of media consumption. This domestic sphere of audio-visual communication embraced radio, television, cassettes, and, more recently, media players, portable phones, digital devices, internet, and streaming services in deregulated global markets. Closer to organised adult learning in 1979 was ‘...the Walkman nightmare version of the learning society. This is the dystopia of long series of individuals permanently plugged into their personal training programmes, but with no sense of the value of learning as something shared with others, including friends, colleagues, families, or their wider social milieu’ (Schuller, 1996, p. 122).

Williams’ final chapter in *Towards 2000*, referring to neoliberalism as ‘Plan X’—an appropriate almost Science Fiction code—constituted a critical analysis of the economic, political, communal, and cultural contradictions of neoliberalism in terms of permanent crisis-management and ‘...politics of temporary tactical advantage’ (Williams, 1983, p. 11-12). This involved the destructive onslaught of market deregulation in the United Kingdom in the Thatcherite late 1970s, followed elsewhere in Europe in the 1980s. Marking the emergent ‘...neoliberal hegemony’ (McGuigan, 2015, p. 27), this was a transformation of capitalism, that aimed to both grasp and control the future. Williams’ prescient analysis argued that emergent, yet still disorganised, neoliberal agendas had recognised the structural decline of capitalist profitability margins and sought to reorganise the state to foster capitalist accumulation favouring financial élites. This was the inevitable present of un-negotiable demands by financial capitalist élites that tolerated no calculation of any meaningful challenge to the repertoire of unbridled capitalist accumulation. In 1984, the national strike by British miners made it all too clear that the dystopia of neoliberal policies was unfolding as the history of a present dominated by permanent insecurity as a way of life for those, the overwhelming majority, who would have to learn to adjust to living precarious lives in increasingly unequal capitalist societies. Neoliberal regimes ensured that deregulation of markets involved disruption of all forms of resistance to the interests of capital, while neo-liberal regulation, by the state, guaranteed capitalist accumulation, accompanied by growing structural inequalities.

By the late 1980s, Williams untimely death was in 1988, it was already all too obvious that neither a revitalisation of the socialist project in the East, nor a socialist turn in the West, played any meaningful part in the future of Europe (Williams, 1989). This

was accompanied by the total corrosion of organised learning as a collective activity devoted to the still necessary struggles to secure social justice and emancipation. Repeatedly reconstructed as ‘individual competence’, the hegemonic neo-liberal policy repertoire of employability has now become the gospel of matching oneself to the skill requirements of employers and the demands of the ‘employability agenda’. This repertoire has come to articulate lifelong learning, from nursery schools, through higher education, vocational training, into retirement, as the ‘permanent education marketplace’ serving the interests of financial capitalism, economic performativity, employability, and individual skill formation (Bengtsson, et. al., 1975; Hake, 1999, 2009, 2016). Persistence of the employability agenda hinges on the success of its proponents in continually redefining employability as ‘progressive modernisation’ in information economies steered by capitalist oligarchies utilising their socially and culturally manipulative artificial intelligent algorithms. They remain the masters of mediating employability in the cultural form of individualised performativity in combination with their ability to perform ideological work in masking the un-reflective habitus of the precarious inhabitants of late financial capitalism (Bourdieu, 1998).

Epilogue: Learning the way out

Published in 1722, Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* was replete with situations recognisable during today’s Covid-19 pandemic (Defoe, 2003). In 1665, the wealthy inhabitants of cities all over Europe thundered in their carriages down country lanes to the safety of their rural retreats, leaving the urban poor condemned to the riskiest and most precarious of essential employments involving guarding the deserted mansions of the rich, nursing the sick, and burying bodies in the cities. Pandemic was a source of dystopia. In contemporary information economies, pandemic is also a rich source of fake news and conspiracy theories, with populist authoritarian regimes engaged in systematic distortion and repression. It is now more necessary than ever to investigate the cultural forms through which citizens endeavour to actively participate in critical cultural practices by creating and sharing meanings with others in the public sphere. This demands an acute awareness of those seeking to reproduce hegemonic social relationships of cultural production and consumption. It is vital to critically investigate the social forces and cultural forms which influence the inhabitants of the digital world by transposing active cultural subject positions to passive consumerist positions for the purposes of unbridled capitalist accumulation (Wierzbicki, 2016). To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1936), a radical critique of the social organisation of adult learning must address the social forces engaged in the cultural ‘making’ of the subject in the age of his/her digital reproduction (Hake, 2014). In the words of Williams, when referring to William Morris’s socialist utopian representations in the 1880s, ‘It belongs to a general renewal of a form of utopian thinking—not the education but the learning of desire—which has been significant among Western radicals since the crises and since the defeats of the 1960s’ (Williams, 1978, p. 213). Despite 50 years of disorganised opposition and uncoordinated subaltern resistance to orchestrated neoliberal repertoires, current failures of incompetent and corrupt governments in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic offer some hope of change. This incompetence of governance might yet open critical social sites that can trigger the regeneration of utopian imagination as a cultural resource for collective socio-political engagement by the commons in rebuilding the public sphere in the 21st century.

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