

Neoliberalism: The Implications for Lifelong Learning and Adult Education¹

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The economy is a subject of so many conversations. The nightly news and the morning papers are preoccupied with the price of housing, rising interest rates, increasing unemployment, the decline in government revenue from taxes, increasing oil prices not to mention the sub-prime lending scandal of the banking system. They are all about the economy. Only the weather matches it for the ability to preoccupy us and dampen spirits!

What is happening in the economy is indeed very important but in Irish adult education circles it is under discussed and understudied, with some notable exceptions (Murphy, 2000). There is a link between the economy and adult education and not just in the context of funding for programmes. Lifelong learning is the link between the economy and adult education. This brief paper intends to make this connection visible for scrutiny and identify the implications of this connection. It is the concept of lifelong learning that connects the traditional field of adult education (in either conservative, humanistic or radical forms) with the political and economic interest in training adults for the global economy. There is a resistance among adult educators to unearthing these connections and as a result many remain unaware of the well thought out ideas and ideologies that subvert our best efforts to educate.

Lifelong learning has a reputable history and has achieved recognition, acceptance and even mantra status as a positive way of expressing support for and belief in the importance of always learning. Both the Council of Europe (in 1970) and UNESCO (Faure, et al, 1972) saw the importance of keeping up to date through learning as a way of dealing with rapid social and technological change. The OECD (1995) identified a learning deficit as a result of the inability of the education system to meet learners' needs. But it is now well established that an economy will not develop unless all are learning.

However, the danger for adult education is that this mantra will provide a veneer of respectability granting its users the dubious benefit of public approval but offering nothing more than human resource development (Field, 2004). Lifelong learning is in reality a cultural and educational revolution. Learning in childhood and youth is not now sufficient, if it ever was, but the governments of the world instead want to change the culture of families and workplaces so that in these places learning will be encouraged, individual responsibility for that learning supported and in this way individuals and families become a driving force for economic development.

A clearer view of the issues that arise can be achieved by turning away from the development of lifelong learning and instead turn to the development of the economy. It is not a matter of chance or even a result of some natural law that resides in the essence of the market place that economies of the world have developed in the way that they have over recent decades. The economy operates and is governed by a set of ideas that is widely known as neoliberal that is a way of describing the form of capitalism in the world today. Only by thoroughly examining and interrogating this form of capitalism can we understand fully the problems adult education may have as

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a result of inhabiting the same space in our nation states as the economy. Then we may commence a response.

First the economy is not driven by a commitment to democracy. This is not only the first comment I want to make but it will also be the final or concluding comment at the end of this paper. The economy is however driven by an unshakable and fiercely held belief in the free market. This belief, along with many other beliefs, is held by the neoliberal economic class as common sense, self-evident, natural, and beyond questioning. The core belief is that the market and not politics will solve all problems. The current Irish government, without great intellectual drivers but with the active support of most economists who act as their cheerleaders is uncritically neoliberal in its ideology or set of guiding ideas.

The best example of the current governments commitment to this neoliberal agenda is in its approach to the health system. It wants to reduce expenditure on health by 'encouraging' the population to take out individual health insurance and supporting, through tax breaks, the creation of a private health and hospital system from which investors can make profit. The market is expected to regulate and respond to supply and demand for health related needs. Many of the stresses (including the hundreds on trolleys in hospital each day) are a result of the ideological push to the privatisation of health, which means that we are all individually responsible for providing adequately for our health needs. If you like what these people are doing to the health system, you will just love what they will do to the education system, including higher education. Again privatisation, commercialisation, individualisation and for-profit colleges will thrive.

Linked to the idea that the market will be the organising principle for the delivery of the state services is the equally deeply held view of the neoliberal establishment that the government must be made small. Big government is bad. By reducing government regulation the economy was allowed to get on with it. But this position is riddled with contradictions, the most obvious being that when the economy gets into trouble, then the state must bail them out. The sub-prime lending was a clear case in point. By making high risk and high interest loans to individuals who had a high risk of defaulting, the banks and other financial institutions gambled, sold on their high interest loan books and as in all 'pyramid' schemes it unravelled. Then came Northern Rock and a host of others (Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac) who gambled and lost but who in the interest of keeping the banking system from collapsing looked to government for funding. The belief that the government must be kept out of the economy because it is incompetent is a contradiction. This belief that power resides in the markets is in need of careful interrogation. The market will not sort everything. It is more problematic when the government underpins the neoliberal economic system.

As part of the process of keeping 'big' government small, the pressure from the economy demands a range of measures that include; privatisation, lower taxes on wealth and salaries, cuts in public spending (incl. health, education and social welfare). Instead individuals are encouraged, by the inefficiencies in the health system, to take out profit making private health insurance and use the private health system and private hospitals. The pressure to 'control public sector pay' under the guise of being competitive is also part of the list of demands.

The problem for promoters of neoliberalism, however, was that, at the same time as they advocated less government involvement in the lives of individuals, they also

realized that the knowledge economy required significant investments in human resource development to meet its labor needs. Workers needed to be educated, especially if the economic sector was not going to invest in education and training.

One solution, of course, was for the economic sector to influence government to tailor existing educational systems to fit with the imperatives of the marketplace. Instead of supporting a broad-based educational system, the OECD for instance and other neoliberal policy development agencies promoted the development of leaner, more focused, and more accountable educational systems that met the specific and oftentimes shifting needs of the economy. As Joel Spring (1998) observes, 'OECD experts want knowledge to be measured according to its contribution to economic growth. In contrast, Confucius and Plato were interested in determining the ability of individuals to create moral and just societies' (Spring, 1998, p.168). This is the core of the tension for modern society as whether it wants to allow the economy or society to dictate the education and learning agenda. The economy has the last word at present and this is hugely problematic.

In addition to supporting the development of a formal educational system more focused on the economy (and far less focused on personal, social, cultural, or aesthetic development), the OECD has also begun to advocate expanding non-formal structures for recurrent education. As part of this effort, they have begun to promote notions like the learning society and lifelong learning as ways of meeting the changing labor market needs beyond what could be provided by traditional educational structures.

We ought to be skeptical of the neoliberal claim that free competition and the market will result in global economic well being. Despite thirty years of rhetoric that 'a rising tide raises all boats,' global development, now more than ever, is generating conditions of increasing inequality and environmental problems. Over the past 30 years, the gap between the haves and the have nots has grown dramatically. While levels of absolute poverty have not deepened to any great extent, there has been a vast increase in the level of relative poverty. People who once enjoyed the security of the middle class find themselves, or their children, slipping into a lower, less secure income bracket.

Ireland is not alone in this and recently according to Stanley Aronowitz neo-liberalism has become the prevailing logic in the US;

The neo-liberal economic doctrine proclaiming the superiority of free markets over public ownership, or even public regulation of private economic activities, has become the conventional wisdom, not only among conservatives but among the progressives.

(Aronowitz, 2003, p. 21)

In addition, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation all support the neoliberalism as they impose their 'economic regime and market values on developing and weaker nations through structural adjustment policies' (Giroux, 2004)

However, in one area in particular the economy is unwilling to address the skills deficit in both current and future workforce. The economy needs skills, flexible

workforce and if possible (though contradictory) cheap labour. In Ireland the economic sector relies heavily on government to educate and train the workforce at all levels including HE and FAS. As long as the workers are educated for work the demand for cut backs in education/training budget is muted. With one of the lowest levels of financing for training by the economy in any of the OECD countries Irish economic sector has also been particularly successful in maximizing government expenditure (grant aid by another name of subsidizing) and minimizing the take from corporations (low tax on corporations).

Henry Giroux is one of the most persistent critics of the pervasive influence of the economy on the educational system. In the process of colonizing the education system for its own economic agenda the current neoliberalism attempts and partly succeeds in destroying all the 'public spheres necessary for the defense of a genuine democracy' (Giroux). In this situation public concerns collapse into private considerations. The government becomes the enemy of freedom and does not see itself as the guardian of the public interest.

In this context Lifelong Learning arrives. But as the neoliberal government accepts less and less responsibility or obligation concerning the poor;

As the laws of the market take precedence over the laws of the state as guardians of the public good, the government increasingly offers little help in mediating the interface between the advance of capital and the rapacious commercial interests.

(Giroux, 2004)

In addition the government does not support the discursive conditions vital for critical citizenship and a democratic public life. Instead it governs by sound bite, photo-opportunity and public relations.

As the economy preoccupies public debate it leaves little room to speak of injustice, social transformation and other areas that constitute, nourish and support democratic visions and possibilities. Anything that cannot be bought or sold is reduced and devalued and seen as not at all important. Many of the areas in which adult and community education works is of diminishing importance... schools, tenants groups, churches, voluntary organizations, NGOs, TUs, etc. Even when citizens are encouraged to 'volunteer' by government it is to fill gaps in public services that have been 'cut back' as not essential. The dominant attitude to the poor becomes one of regulation where increasing numbers are kept in prison, there is increased police brutality, and the poor are punished rather than served.

Neoliberalism is not just an economic policy designed to cut government spending and ... free market forces from government responsibilities; it is also a political, philosophical and ideology that effects every dimension of social life.

(Giroux, 2004)

Citizens are defined as consumers, customers, clients. There is no future outside the market. There is only the sovereignty of the market and no political sovereignty.

Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as

Theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

It places the onus on the individual rather than the state to take care of social welfare and education. It is not about improving the conditions for all (Harvey, 2005, p. 9) but only for economic elites. It attempts to control the wealth of an increasingly global elite. Inequalities are structural to the neoliberal agenda (p.16).

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