Chapter 9

Whose Knowledge? Whose Power? Whose Democracy?

Adult Education and the Changing Political Balance of Class Power in Britain (1870–1923)

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Introduction

> Knowledge is power. [Francis Bacon, *Meditationes Sacrae*, 1597]
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> […] you may effect [sic] a revolution, but you will be trodden down under the feet of knowledge unless you get it for yourselves; even if you win victory you will be trodden down again […] if you leave knowledge in the hands of privilege; because knowledge will always win over ignorance. [Gore, 1910, p. 14]

The idea that 'knowledge is power' has long been a controversial topic for debate. Bacon's famous maxim implies that those who have knowledge have the potential to hold and exercise power over their own, and the lives of others. Here, knowledge is a valuable resource that is shaped in part by those who have access to it, and more importantly, by those who understand how to apply it to achieve a definite aim. Power is the application of knowledge, the taking of action based on sound evidence. Sound, well-evidenced, ethically based knowledge is thus the foundation of all intelligent constructive action in the best interests of the majority. In the words of an artisan student contemplating the relationship between education and knowledge: 'Higher education does not consist in the mere acquisition of knowledge. It consists in the acquisition of knowledge, coupled with the power to apply that knowledge to future purposes' (Roberts, 1891, p. 7). A key element of the relationship between knowledge and power is who controls and directs the action of getting things done efficiently, ethically and successfully.

The churchman Charles Gore, in the quotation above, emphasises the significance of the relationship between knowledge, power and class. Gore, like others, recognised the rising challenge of the British labour movement, and its potential to disrupt the political status quo. The widespread mistrust of labour was based on the premise that those without education, without knowledge and without experience of power would govern poorly. The British adult education movement aimed to rectify this perception by making knowledge from elite British academic universities accessible to working-class people to enable them to exercise political power as part of future governments.

Following this line of thinking, a binary narrative of the knowledge and power hypotheses emerges between those who have and have not got knowledge which equates to those who have and have not got power. Historically, traditional forms of social and political organisation either prevail, are disrupted or experience revolution when challenged by a change in who attains, creates and applies knowledge as power. History shows us that the principles underpinning the pairing of knowledge and power are relatively static but who influences the two elements is dynamic. It is this specific aspect of the relationship between power and knowledge that this chapter will analyse with reference to adult education and the changing political balance of class power in Britain between 1870 and 1923. In the case of Britain, the knowledge base and content did not change but what did change was who had access to it, and how it was applied in the form of political power by the Labour Party in the best interests of a previously politically unrepresented section of society. The chapter will support its argument and analysis in two ways.

It will firstly place the relationship between knowledge and power in a theoretical framework with reference to the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. It will give an overview of the different approaches and ideas that each theoretician uses to explain how and why political power is applied in the interests of privileged groups who have access to education, knowledge and power.

Then it will apply the theoretical understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge outlined in section one to the social, political and economic context of British adult education from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In addition, it will analyse how and why the British adult education movement contributed to changing who held the balance of knowledge and power in terms of class representation and the political status quo.

Historical evidence and research will be used to explain how key educationalists of the period including James Stuart, a founder of university extension, Albert Mansbridge, founder of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), Richard Henry Tawney, William Temple, Charles Gore and others understood the role of knowledge in relation to democracy, citizenship and the moral exercise of political power.

Marx, Gramsci, and Foucault – Theoretical Interpretations of Knowledge and Power

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels provide an economic perspective on the relationship between knowledge and power. For Marx and Engels, 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 3). The idea of class conflict is central to Marx's understanding of how society is organised and is embedded in his analysis of how a capitalist economy works. How different classes gain power in the historical conflict between them depends on who owns the means of production and thus controls the production, distribution, sale of goods and generation of profits.

From a Marxist perspective, a capitalist society is one in which workers, who have only their labour to sell, are consistently exploited by a capitalist class, the owners of the means of production. Furthermore, the inequality of the relationship between worker and employer is consolidated by a general acceptance by the worker of the economic status quo (Stoddart, 2007, p. 195). Mark C. J. Stoddart explains why workers accept the basic inequality of a capitalist economy in terms of how the value of an object is understood and used by society. Objects produced by workers can have two values, a 'use value', and an 'exchange value'. The use value of an object centres on realising its potential function. For example, bricks can be used to construct buildings. But, once the object is monetised for a capitalist economy, it attains an exchange value whereby the origins of its production by human labour are no longer visible or relevant to the use value of the object. Workers accept this mode of employment which compels them to become consumers of the objects they produce. They are essentially paid to produce the goods which they then buy back for consumption from the capitalist class. This system of production cements the social relationship between workers and capitalist employers and 'functions to secure the participation of subordinate classes in exploitative relations of production' (Stoddart, 2007, p. 196). A question that arises from Marx's thesis is: why is it so difficult to disrupt the economic relationship described above through dissent and resistance, to transform who owns the means of production and by doing so end exploitation of workers?

Antonio Gramsci applies the idea of hegemony to explain why the exploitative relationship between workers and capitalists persists so successfully. Gramsci posits that the state has the power to alter behaviour through two methods – coercion and persuasion – in support of maintaining a capitalist model of society and economy (Stoddart, 2007, pp. 200–201). Though the state can use coercion in the form of violence to force compliance, other civic institutions such as schools, the church, family, and mass media are able to shape and disseminate hegemonic power. This type of power is cultural and relies on the dominance of a shared common sense across classes that subscribes to

the social, political, cultural and economic traditions of the nation. Hegemony is persuasive rather than coercive and so is a more effective organic way of cultivating a shared social, economic and political outlook. Gramsci places the concept of hegemony in a dynamic framework that is subject to resistance and challenge. It is not static and can be contested by heterogenous groups with different interests than the state and the dominant culture (Stoddart, 2007, p. 202). In societies that operate along lines of hegemony as opposed to the exercise of outright violence by the state to maintain control over society, an ongoing struggle for cultural influence takes place. Within this framework, it is possible for the subordinate classes to displace the hegemony of the dominant culture with an alternative one that supports changing the economic, social, and political superstructures (Stoddart, 2007, p. 202).

So far, the chapter has given a Marxist analysis of the traditional economic relationship between workers and capitalists. This relationship is based on the exploitation of those who have only their labour to sell by those who own the means of production. In this relationship, the owners of the means of production hold the greatest power and apply it to consolidate their social, political and economic position. However, Gramsci's thesis on hegemony implies that such relationships can change if political space exists to allow mass cultural shifts in socioeconomic political thinking and attitudes to occur, which forms a new consensus shared by the majority. How can this mass shift in attitude and thinking occur to displace one type of hegemony for another? This chapter argues that education is key to supporting major cultural shifts that alter the dominant balance of knowledge and power in favour of those who previously were without them. To explore how this works, it is useful to refer to Michel Foucault's conception of knowledge and its relevance to power.

Foucault takes a different approach from Marx, Engels and Gramsci to explaining the relationship between knowledge and power. Instead of focusing on the economic manifestation of power in society as Marx did, or on hegemonic cultural power as Gramsci did, Foucault instead analyses power in the framework of an ongoing linguistic discourse on vast collections of different types of knowledge that include historic, political, economic, anthropological and scientific. To understand Foucault's philosophy on the relationship between knowledge and power, it is helpful to define what a discourse is. Discourses are verbal and written debates, communications and analyses of different systems of knowledge. Martin Guardado defines discourse as 'extended text – that is, text beyond the sentence level – […] commonly understood to include oral and written language' (Guardado, 2018, p. 71). Who dominates and controls those discourses, verbal and written, dictates how knowledge is applied and used as power (Guardado, 2018, pp. 75–78). Put another way, Niklas Luhmann observes: 'The ownership of knowledge confers authority. This person can teach the others. The individual who claims authority, must therefore base it on

knowledge. The knowledge function and political function cannot be separated' (Luhmann, quoted by Stehr & Adolf, 2018, p. 193). For Foucault, the discourse of knowledge is at the heart of the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault explains this relationship as each being 'an integral part of the other, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to be dependent on power. […] It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power' (Foucault, quoted by Stehr & Adolf, 2018, p. 193). The question that arises from Foucault's analysis of power is: who applies it, and can this be altered? The process by which this occurs is one of critique, defined by Foucault as 'the refusal to "be governed *like that*"' (Foucault, 1997, p. 44, emphasis in original).

Foucault's ideas on discourses of knowledge are very much a postmodern development in theoretical thinking on the politics of the relationship between knowledge and power. However, Foucault's approach to the profound significance of knowledge can be applied to the history of British adult education. For example, Charles Gore makes a Foucauldian interpretation of knowledge and its relationship to power in the opening quotation of this chapter. Gore was addressing the members of the WEA, a non-statutory voluntary organisation established in 1903 that aimed to make higher education more accessible to working-class adults. For Gore and other early twentieth-century educationalists like him, education was key to empowering working-class people in Britain at a political level.

The emergence of mass democracy in Britain followed an uneven, gradual and unpredictable trajectory. These changes occurred in specific social, economic, and political contexts that corresponded to the political theories of Marx, Gramsci, and Foucault on how knowledge and power are held and exercised. A Marxist interpretation, for example, is made by Edward Palmer Thompson who emphasises the persistent presence of an ancient British proletariat who agitated for greater political representation over the centuries (Thompson, 1963). Within the vast historiography dedicated to explaining and analysing the ways in which Britain evolved into a mass democracy, it is easy to overlook the importance of adult education as part of the discourse of power and knowledge on how and why a formidable labour movement emerged in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The oversight does not diminish the significance of adult education in changing the dynamic between knowledge and power in Britain during the early part of the twentieth century. An outline of the historical context of the British adult education movement will help explain the role of adult education in changing the discourse on knowledge and power of the period.

Knowledge, Power and Adult Education – 1870

A seminal starting point for this analysis is 1870, as this was when the 1870 Elementary Education Act was passed. Prior to 1870, no statutory national education system existed in Britain. Rather, an ad hoc arrangement existed whereby the state allocated funds to religious institutions, charities and philanthropic enterprises to set up schools and disseminate mainly primary education to children whose families could afford it. The geographical distribution of schools was thus extremely uneven, with some areas being without schools of any description. As a result of this situation, large sections of the working-class population remained innumerate and illiterate. In addition, the education disseminated tended to have a religious focus as, prior to 1870, the Anglican Church dominated the education system. The great significance of the 1870 Education Act was that it established the basis of the national statutory compulsory secular primary and secondary education system that exists in Britain today.

Key to the context of the passing of the 1870 Elementary Education Act was the Industrial Revolution which placed Britain at the forefront of the global economy in terms of production and wealth. William Forster (MP), an advocate of the 1870 Education Act (often referred to as the Forster Act) explained on introducing the Act to Parliament why it was imperative to introduce statutory elementary education:

> Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity… Uneducated labourers – and many of our labourers are utterly uneducated – are for the most part, unskilled labourers, and if we leave our work-force any longer unskilled […] [t]hey will become overmatched in the competition of the world. [Maclure, 1986, p. 104]

Forster makes the point clearly. Here we can see that maintaining and enhancing the economy was a central concern for those governing Britain and to achieve that goal, it was necessary to develop a skilled literate and numerate workforce through state intervention. The 1870 Education Act 'filled the gaps' in the education system by establishing school boards in areas where there were no elementary schools and gave the boards powers to build and run schools. It also established the principle of secular education that slowly replaced the Anglican Church's dominance over education. A subsequent Act in 1880 made it compulsory for children between the ages of five and ten to attend school. In 1891 elementary education was made free. Further Acts in 1883 and 1893 respectively raised the school leaving age from eleven to twelve (*UK Parliament*).

As can be seen, the development of a comprehensive primary education system was slow and haphazard. Though the principles of compulsory, secular and free elementary education were established, problems persisted with applying those principles. Child labour remained common and was generally accepted by employers and the workforce itself as part of how the economy

worked. Many working-class families could not afford to sacrifice the income that their children generated as part of the workforce (Power, 2022, pp. 5, 11, 19). As a result, children either attended schools and worked outside of school hours or simply did not attend school as was the law. Indeed, in the 1890s, Sir John Gorst observed in Parliament that there was still 'nearly three-quarters of a million of children whose names ought to be on the books of some elementary school, and who do not appear at all […]. Of those who are on the books of the elementary schools, nearly one-fifth are continually absent' (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 325). The economic and social adversity that working-class families faced in this era of laissez-faire politics and economics meant that education of any sort, even elementary, was a luxury that required time and money to pursue, both of which were in short supply for the majority.

The need to disseminate a working knowledge of how to read, write and do basic arithmetic to the wider labour force shows how those in positions of power controlled access to a minimum standard of education in support of the state's aim to enhance Britain's economic performance. Here, we can see Gore's argument in action. Knowledge in this specific scenario remained in the 'hands of privilege', controlled by the state and the elite political class. A question that emerges is: to what extent did the state control all provision of education?

The legislation passed as outlined improved access to primary education for most children. However, access to secondary and university education remained profoundly limited for working-class people. Consequently, a growing demand for adult education emerged, which was addressed by a broad range of non-statutory voluntary adult education organisations. These organisations included the mechanics institutes, the young adult schools, the Co-Operative Union and co-operative societies, the working men's colleges, education settlements, and university extension. Each had a unique perspective on the significance of adult education, as well as their own ethos and system of disseminating post-primary education. Collectively, they formed the British adult education movement (Fieldhouse & Associates, 1996; Goldman, 1995; Gordon et al., 1991; Harrison, 1961; Harrop, 1987; Kelly, 1992; Simon, 1990).

Associational space existed outside of the control of the state. This was a vibrant community of diverse adult education that voluntary organisations occupied. Despite their different approaches to disseminating adult education, these organisations shared a common aim to improve the quantity and quality of knowledge (of whatever type – technical, classical, scientific, liberal arts, religious) available to people who had limited access to post-primary education, namely women and working-class people.

The issue presented here of what access people had to different forms of post-primary education raises the matter of who controlled the store of knowledge, or in Foucauldian terms, the knowledge discourse of the period. In Britain, as discussed above, the political elite – those in government – exerted

power via legislation based on their knowledge of the economic context, to create a literate and numerate workforce fit for industrial employment. However, the political elite did not hold a monopoly on different forms of education, as was demonstrated by the emergence of the diverse range of non-statutory voluntary adult education organisations. It is in this instance that we can observe an important hegemonic historical shift in the balance of knowledge and power, and can start to explore the impact of that change in terms of those whose knowledge, power and democracy gained traction in the twentieth century.

University Extension and the WEA (1872–1903)

The chapter will now focus on the collaboration between the WEA and university extension to analyse how and why the shift in who had access to knowledge occurred. University extension, an early form of extramural education, was a key part of the British adult education movement. University extension schemes were comprised of a series of lectures that were delivered by university lecturers, based to begin with at either Oxford or Cambridge University, to large audiences in different parts of the country where there was a demand for higher education. In practice, university extension took on the functions of a peripatetic university (Goldman, 1995; Draper, 1923; Stuart, 1911; Rowbotham, 1981; Pashley, 1968; Jepson, 1955).

University extensionists included James Stuart and other like-minded middle-class Oxbridge educated academics who responded to the demand for meaningful post-primary education from working- and middle-class men and women on a pragmatic and ideological basis. University extensionists recognised that the elite universities of Britain remained exclusive spaces for those with wealth, privilege and status. They understood that to remain relevant to a modern industrial society and to be an integral part of a future mass democracy, universities were under an obligation to reform and adopt a more inclusive policy to widen participation.

Stuart's views on extension help explain why it was significant from a political as well as a humanitarian perspective. In his autobiography, Stuart identified the 'widespread and real desire for some form of higher education which existed throughout the country' and believed that the universities were under an obligation to meet this demand (Stuart, 1911, p. 168). He also reasoned that extension would be 'a great step towards making the Universities truly national institutions and no less beneficial to them than to the country' (Stuart, quoted by Goldman, 1995, p. 15). In Stuart's view, it was the universities that were best qualified to deliver education to the masses. He stated that 'it was desirable that the country at large should become heirs to the immense educational traditions of the two Universities' (Stuart, 1911, p. 168). Another university extensionist, Robert

Davies Roberts, quite radically, wished to establish a national system of higher education, arguing that education was a democratic right and as such needed to be made available to everyone irrespective of wealth (Roberts, 1887, p. 4).

Frederick Temple, the Lord Bishop of London, in his opening address to the delegates of a University Extension Conference in 1887 identified the change in attitude to education: '[…] this universality, this demand for education by the masses and for the masses, is something as far as I know quite unprecedented in all past history' (Temple, 1887, p. 22). He observed that the 'idea of universal education' had 'laid hold of the leaders of the masses and [was] penetrating daily with more and more power into the masses themselves' (Temple, 1887, p. 21).

The historical evidence presented here of some of the thinking that supported university extension shows that liberal-minded academics and other educationalists were very conscious of the need and mass demand from below for universal higher education. It also shows how a shift was occurring in the collective consciousness of the nation about who should have access to education beyond the primary level. No longer was it generally accepted that only the elite were unquestioningly entitled to a full education. Thinking and attitudes were slowly shifting in this area whereby the educational rights of women and/or working-class people were under debate. This shift in thinking reflects Gramsci's model of hegemony whereby the demand for universal post-primary and higher education was driven by a combination of working-class people desiring more knowledge, the academic community, members of the clergy and others to change the status quo.

Universities as historic civic institutions had as much, if not more, to gain from extension as extension students did. By making themselves part of the solution to the problem of undereducation, the universities – huge repositories of knowledge of all types – maintained control of the knowledge discourse. They also essentially controlled how that knowledge was disseminated to a very different non-traditional working-class student body. In this way, universities in Britain succeeded in remaining relevant as major centres of higher education that played a key role in shaping the political leadership of the country.

The division between those with privilege, and thus knowledge and power, and those without privilege, in terms of access to different forms of education was narrowing. Universities reflected this trend by becoming involved in extension schemes and exercising an agenda that aimed to widen participation by non-traditional student groups in higher education. It was this slow, but nonetheless persistent, erosion of the idea of privilege during the late nineteenth century in relation to post-primary education that the adult education movement in Britain challenged and disrupted. The questions that this chapter focuses on now are: to what extent did the adult education movement succeed in supporting non-traditional adult students (that is, those from working-class backgrounds) in getting, as Gore urged, 'knowledge for themselves'? And what did this mean in terms of the balance of knowledge and power in Britain?

Though extension schemes existed nationally, many working-class students were either unable to afford the cost of lectures, or intimidated by the environment in which lectures took place, or both (Kumbhat, 2021, p. 56). Albert Mansbridge, one of the key architects of the British adult education movement of the early twentieth century, recognised this problem and committed his life to making higher education as accessible as possible to all those who wished to acquire it. Mansbridge came from a working-class background and was compelled to leave school at the age of fourteen to work, because his family was unable to support the cost of his further education (Jennings, 2002). He attended university extension lectures as a way of supplementing his own incomplete education. Mansbridge immersed himself in the pursuit of education and knowledge for its own sake. For him, the value of education was in its capacity to transform individuals in outlook and potential (Mansbridge, 1920; 1944). He identified the problem with university extension as being that it did not lend itself to the learning and teaching needs of working-class adult students. To this end, Mansbridge, with great determination, made adult education his life's work. In 1903, with his wife Frances, Mansbridge founded the WEA. Mansbridge's vision was for the WEA to collaborate with the representatives of university extension and working-class organisations to improve access to university extension. To achieve this, Mansbridge worked to change the system through which university extension was delivered. Prior to the WEA, the delivery of university extension schemes was organised by the universities themselves. Mansbridge, a born organiser, took a very different approach and succeeded in setting up joint committees, comprised of representatives from university extension, trade unions, other working-class organisations, local government, local and regional WEA branches. The joint committees worked collaboratively to organise classes in areas where there was a demand for higher education. This involved a great deal of work on the part of local and regional organisers who identified demand for adult education in different localities and then recruited students for the courses on offer (Jennings, 2003, p. 18).

What was unique about the way in which the WEA worked was that organisers negotiated with the student body to determine what subjects students wished to study. This way of approaching students broke with tradition, because it gave students a say in what they studied and sometimes even which tutor delivered their classes. Another vital aspect of how the WEA operated was that WEA administrators who liaised with the student body at ground level, controlled what education was delivered, by whom as well as how, when, and where. By taking this new approach to the organisation and dissemination of university extension, the WEA was able to use the resources of universities, in the form of lecturers and their vast wealth of subject knowledge, in the best interests of a working-class adult student body (Jennings, 2003, pp. 18–20).

Another important point to note about the partnership was that the WEA fully accepted that the universities were best placed in terms of expertise and staff to support the dissemination and delivery of knowledge in the liberal arts and other subjects. This was never an issue for the WEA. What was an issue was who had access to it. The knowledge discourse was not in dispute, but rather how accessible it was to a wider underprivileged adult population who demanded more from the education system.

What was perhaps more controversial was the tension that developed in the discourse on the purpose of higher education regarding its potential to transform students. Mansbridge wished to move away from the model of education as a ladder that people ascended to become upwardly socially and economically mobile. Implicit within this framework was that being from a working-class background was a disadvantage to one's life's prospects and that, to improve one's life, it was necessary to move out of one's class.

Instead of regarding education as a ladder, a means to an end, Mansbridge and others promoted the idea of education as a broad highway upon which all classes travelled alongside each other in harmony. The WEA's journal was named *The Highway* to reflect this idea. The metaphor of education as a highway highlights the core ideology shared by the British adult education movement as a collective – that all were universally equal, irrespective of class and wealth status, when it came to who should have access to education and knowledge. However, an even more significant point of tension in the discourse on access to higher education focused specifically on the relationship between knowledge and power.

Whose Knowledge? Whose Power? Whose Democracy? (1907–23)

A direct challenge to who had legitimate access to university-held knowledge came in 1907 at the Oxford and Working-Class Education Conference attended by 400 delegates from 210 mostly working-class organisations (Jennings, 1976, p. 12). A report of the conference was published, called *Oxford and Working-Class Education* (Workers' Educational Association & Oxford University, 1909). It was at this conference that the issue of who should have access to education and knowledge held by the universities came to head. One of the delegates, John McKenzie Mactavish, a shipwright from Portsmouth, expressed the position of many working-class people by publicly stating at the conference: 'I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give. I claim it as a right, wrongfully withheld' (Mactavish, quoted by Jennings, 1976, p. 12). Mactavish's demand set the tone and agenda for the future organisation of adult education in Britain. The report recognised the link between a growing demand for education and the emergence

of a politicised labour movement (Workers' Educational Association & Oxford University, 1909, p. 45). In particular, the report acknowledged that the reasons supporting the demand for greater education lay in the changes 'taking place in the constitution of English society and in the distribution of political power'. It recognised the 'growth of Labour Representation in the House of Commons, [and the] great increase in the membership of political associations which […] [claimed] […] to express the ideals of a considerable section of the working classes […] in political action, and the growing demand for a widening in the sphere of social organisation' (Workers' Educational Association & Oxford University, 1909, p. 47).

Furthermore, the report identified that the ancient universities of Britain had a strong tradition of educating men 'for all departments of political life and public administration' (Workers' Educational Association & Oxford University, 1909, p. 48). Essentially, the role of the universities was to educate and prepare the political elite and ruling classes, 'those who, as ministers or Members of Parliament, or public officials wielded great influence' for the service of the nation (Workers' Educational Association & Oxford University, 1909, p. 48). Oxford University appreciated that society was undergoing a radical change whereby the political leaders of the future were likely to be from working-class rather than aristocratic backgrounds, and, to maintain its position of political influence, chose to support an agenda for widening participation in higher education. Thus, a major hegemonic shift occurred in how universities perceived themselves as necessary to the educational needs of these future leaders from non-traditional social backgrounds. Part of this shift required them to make their repositories of knowledge accessible to working-class students. Critically, the universities and the WEA were united in accepting that the provision of higher education to working-class people was a necessity and of political significance to the nation. One of the reasons why the WEA supported universities as centres of excellence in education and knowledge was because they operated a policy of impartiality and non-sectarianism in education of all types. This position allowed the WEA to maintain its constructive working relationship with the universities while also allowing it to fully support the principle that all, no matter what their class status in society, should have equal opportunities to access higher education. In this way, the WEA, as a working-class organisation, reflected the general sentiments and ideas of the wider political labour movement that emerged between 1900 and 1923. To understand the shift in thinking regarding who should have access to education, and more significantly to what sort of education, it is pertinent to refer briefly to the historiography on the matter.

Rodney Barker analyses the Labour Party's attitudes to education and educational policies that by and large supported the position of the WEA and vice versa (Barker, 1969). Barker argues that the Labour Party did not wish to revolutionise the content of the education curriculum in any significant way,

but rather sought to legislate for equal access to education and educational opportunity. Barker expresses the general aim of Labour Party education policy as 'fairer shares, not a new society' (Barker, 1972, p. 138). Here, it is evident that the Labour Party's outlook on education chimed with that of the WEA and the universities. In addition, a cross-party consensus existed between the Liberal, Conservative and Labour parties, to create a universal primary, secondary and higher education system, accessible to all, irrespective of an individual's wealth, status, religion or gender. Michael Sadler, secretary to the Oxford Delegation for University Extension, summed up the process underpinning the work of the adult education movement as 'the greater equalisation of intellectual opportunity' (Sadler, 1892, p. 19). This line of thinking reflected that of Mansbridge. Mansbridge, in a series of seminal articles ('Co-Operation, Trade Unionism and University Extension'), laid out his philosophy of education in terms of its political significance from a working-class perspective (Mansbridge, 1903). He distinguished between 'true education' that 'directly induces thought, which permeates the whole of society' and false education that promoted 'an unthinking absorption of the facts' (1920, p. 1). Mansbridge connected the dissemination of education to the growing political power of the labour movement. He supported labour representation in parliament so long as it was 'preconditioned by wise education' (1920, p. 2). Mansbridge argued that unless the rank and file of the labour movement were sufficiently educated, the 'lack of thinking power in the rank and file' would 'nullify the good effect of such representation, however capable the representatives' were (1920, p. 2). For Mansbridge, access to education and knowledge centred on supporting working-class people as responsible citizens in gaining political representation in their own right. The provision and dissemination of education via the WEA were designed to be integrated into the democratic institutions and structures of British society.

One might argue at this point that the adult education movement as described did little to change the balance of knowledge and power in the world of British politics in a meaningful way. All it did was draw attention to, and partially rectify the problem of, a widely undereducated working-class and female population who were slowly gaining political representation and power. Nor did the Labour Party seek in any significant way to use their growing political power to change the knowledge discourse to reflect a socialist outlook. Its leaders and followers supported the traditional outlook on the education infrastructure and system and accepted it as fit for purpose. On the face of it, in a Gramscian framework of hegemony, all that had changed was that a larger number of people than before 1870 had greater access to the body of knowledge held by the universities. Similarly, in a Foucauldian framework, all that had happened was that leaders of the labour movement replicated the political status quo by campaigning and legislating for fairer and more equal access to the traditional knowledge discourse. And, yet, although these views of the role of adult

education in relation to the relationship between knowledge and power hold substance, they fail to be completely convincing. This is because the boundaries of hegemony and how the knowledge discourse is shaped and controlled are nebulous and unpredictable. In support of this position, Roger Fieldhouse argues that a central contradiction exists in a liberal education system such as the one that has developed in Britain over the centuries. He stated that:

> The dialectical process of liberal education must permit all arguments and ideas to be expressed and the best and most powerful to triumph. This means that it is always possible for an ideological unorthodox perspective to challenge the status quo, raise the political consciousness of the students, win the argument, and equip and encourage people to pursue a social purpose very different from the one favoured by the educational providers. It is this Socratic approach – dialectic rather than indoctrinating – that will bring ideological change. [Fieldhouse, 1985, p. 131]

Thus, 'with its close affinity to the mainstream British liberal tradition, the adult education movement shared this central contradiction' (Fieldhouse, 1985, p. 132). Fieldhouse's thesis explains how the state, by supporting a tradition of liberal education, also paradoxically supported a learning and teaching environment that gave space for new ways of thinking to emerge and reshape the knowledge discourse. Fieldhouse's analysis identifies the role of the students themselves in reinterpreting knowledge (as disseminated by the adult education movement) in terms of its significance to their lived experience. This is an important aspect of the relationship between knowledge and power to take account of. The consumers of education, the students themselves, had and have as much agency as the creators and providers of education, when understanding and applying it to reflect their own social, economic, political and cultural interests. Jonathan Rose explores this much overlooked aspect of the history of adult education in his seminal work *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Rose, 2001). Rose's view of the WEA's contribution to the labour movement is that 'at the grass-roots level, the WEA created an articulate and obstreperous working-class intelligentsia' (Rose, 2001, p. 276).

Evidence of an emerging 'articulate and obstreperous working-class intelligentsia' is apparent in the historical record of the WEA. The WEA as an organisation was highly conscious of itself as a working-class organisation that not only disseminated knowledge to working-class students but also prepared adult students for citizenship. As such, it took opportunities to draw attention to the impact that WEA students made in public life. *The Adult Student as Citizen: A Record of Service by WEA Students Past and Present* was published by the WEA in 1938 (Workers' Educational Association, 1938). It lists past and present WEA students in England and Wales known to be engaged in some form of public service, which included magistrates, MPs, local government personnel, councillors, and committee members. The list included 2174 individuals and gave a sense of what some adult students of

the WEA were doing with their lives. Tawney, a key figure in the British adult education movement, clarified, in the preface of *The Adult Student as Citizen,* the raison d'être of the WEA. He stated that the WEA 'looks on education not only as a means of developing individual character and capacity, but as an equipment for the exercise of social rights and responsibilities' (Workers' Educational Association, 1938, p. 4). Tawney's statement shows how the WEA perceived its students as independent-minded individuals with the potential to make a significant difference to the life of the nation, using a traditional body of knowledge gained through adult education.

The Adult Student as Citizen lists only a fraction of WEA students. The total number of WEA students in 1919–20 was 12,438 and had risen in 1941–42 to 58,582 (Workers' Educational Association, 1943, p. 31). These figures show the extent to which the WEA provided opportunities to those interested in acquiring knowledge, taking ownership of it, and using it to change their lives and the lives of others. In the world of British politics, the shift in the balance of who exercised knowledge as power manifested itself most notably in the election of the first Labour Government in 1923.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the dynamic relationship between knowledge and power in the world of the British adult education movement from 1870 to circa 1923. It has considered the relationship between knowledge and power in three theoretical frameworks – Marxist, Gramscian and Foucauldian – and sought to explore how the British adult education movement democratised access to education by collaborating with universities to operate an agenda to widen participation. The historical narrative and historiography of the British adult education movement do not conform precisely to any of the three frameworks. Rather, a combination of elements of Marxist, Gramscian and Foucauldian ideas can be applied to different aspects of what the participants of the British adult education movement hoped to achieve – a society that integrated all as equal citizens, irrespective of class, in active democratic citizenship within the traditional political framework. At no point in the history of adult education was the knowledge content challenged in any significant way with long-lasting repercussions. What was challenged was the principle of who should have access to higher education. Once the principle of equality of opportunity to access education, irrespective of class, wealth or gender was established, it became possible for the consumers of education, the students themselves, to become part of the knowledge discourse and to use the knowledge gained to represent their own diverse political, economic, social and cultural interests. Through this process, a gradual change occurred in who owned and created knowledge, whereby it

moved from the 'hands of privilege' to the minds of the many. It supported an agenda to widen democracy, nurture citizenship, and create a fairer society.

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