Adult Education and the Rise of British Cultural Studies

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According to Stuart Hall, the publication of three books, namely The Uses of Literacy (Richard Hoggart), Culture and Society (Raymond Williams), The Making of the English Working Class (E. P. Thompson) marked the beginning of British cultural studies. However, as British scholar Tom Steele pointed out in The Emergence of Cultural Studies:

It is important to emphasize that these works were not isolated events but were nested in a widespread culture of experiment in adult education which had begun with the debates over arts and literature teaching in the mid- to late-1930s. (Steele, 14)

That is to say, it was the broad discussions and debates over the issues of class and culture in the field of adult education that finally gave birth to British cultural studies. Regrettably, historical researches on the rise of British cultural studies fell to receive critical recognition in China. This article aims to reveal the close relationship between early British Cultural Studies and adult education so as to better our understanding over this issue.

Tracing the history of the British adult education, it was originally employed as a
tool to indoctrinate the underclass. According to Wendy Redal, Church has been a dominant educational force in Britain for centuries. In the early 18th century, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge offered adult education classes to help individuals to read the Bible and understand the church catechism. During the early years of the industrial revolution, the Methodist Societies established by John Wesley advocated education among people working at the harbors, mining areas and other rapidly growing industrial centers of the North of England so as to improve their moral awareness. As a result, Charity schools for children and adults from mining working families came into being. The Sunday School movement at the end of 18th century was also influential in widening popular support for and involvement in workers' education. (Redal, 184–197)

In the developmental history of British adult education, the university extension movement in the 19th century is also an important contributing factor. In 1873, on the initiative of the Scottish radical James Stuart, regular teachers from University of Cambridge, Oxford University and University of London were paid for the courses they offered to the adults. Such movement flourished nationally and had considerable influence both in Europe and America. (Steele, 42) As a result, many university colleges were established in industrial cities and the working class received more educational opportunities. In the meantime, the cheap publications in 20th century provided people with easy access to the works of great writers. The founding of Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in 1903 was a landmark in the history of adult education in Britain. As a working class organization, its aim was to "awaken the desire for education amongst working people in the belief that education was central to the cause of emancipation" (Steele, 88). As Hoggart pointed out, out of the University Extension movement, but even more out of the Workers' Educational Association, there emerged the Great Tradition. Its peak was a continuation of the adult tutorial classes which had lasted for half a century. (Hoggart, 1994: 94) Such tradition was more prominent and highly emphasized in the northern industrial cities with active involvement of many intellectuals who took pride in this practice.

Workers' education movement resulted in high literacy rate for working-classes. (Steele, 40) Workers with gradually increased class consciousness gained deeper understanding of their own cultural status. In the 1930s, the spread of Marxism in Britain further promoted this trend. Researches into the working-class culture and its formation received critical attention, which in turn generated heated debates over the nature and purpose of adult education since the early 20th century.
One side of the debate was represented by the Labourist left. They viewed WEA, an organization made up of gentlemen, heads of the Chamber of Commerce, religious leaders, as a vehicle for the middle-class to impose their bourgeois ideology upon the working-classes. It was an artifice to divert class struggle, having nothing to do with the working-class life and playing no significant role in changing their status. Its activists G. D. H. Cole believed that if workers' education movement was to allow itself to be "merged in the general movement of adult education" it would "commit suicide". (Steele, 12 - 14) Hoggart expressed his obvious disapproval in his autobiography as well:

More politically, it is said that the tutorial class tradition assumed that university adult education should make over working-class students into the image of the cultivated bourgeois—combining the Protestant Ethic with middle-class artistic gentility. It put too much stress on solitary work for self-improvement; it lacked an adequate sense of working-class solidarity and communality. (1994: 136)

The other side of the argument was held by the Leavisist. As a successor of cultural elitism, F. R. Leavis worried that the widespread of popular culture constituted a great challenge to their traditional values, moral standards, and literary classics as well as their fervent guardians. Regarding themselves as cultural redeemers, these Leavisists launched a battle against popular culture by promoting the study of "Great Works". They believed that literature played an irreplaceable role in improving public sensibility, rebuilding moral strength, as well as rediscovering cultural and literary traditions. Under the influence of Leavisism, many of its followers joined "Workers' Education Association", and become famous. They opposed the extremist practices in the field of adult education resulted from ever-increasing class consciousness. They hoped to construct a notion of a "common culture" among the working-classes so as to replace class consciousness with the so-called "Englishness". (Steele, 33)

On Tutors' Bulletin issued in August, 1933, the co-editor of the WEA's publication Highway, founder of Penguin and Pelican Press, former secretary of the British Arts Council, W. E. Williams spoke highly of culture and environment for the positive role it played in redefining literature teaching in the WEA. In his view, the problems of modern life were so complex that the ordinary people could not possibly cope with them sensibly. People often resort to their emotion in decision making. So there should be "more cultivation of emotion and less training of mass-
opinion” (Steele, 81) in adult education. In other words, excellent literary works could inspire people’s noble sentiments and enable them to make correct judgments and choices in real life. Based on this thought, in the 1930s and 1940s, the aim of Highway was to shift adult education away from its “archaic” concern with the working class and class struggle towards a more popular educational style centered on the arts and closer to the universities. (Steele, 73)

The above argument was actually a controversy between the Leavisist and the British Marxists, and the Leavisist won victory in the end. Consequently, the workers’ education movement which was independent of the British adult education fell into a low ebb. In the 1930s, Raymond Williams who was still studying in the university witnessed the whole process of this debate. A few decades later, he analyzed the reasons of the failure of the British Marxist in his Culture and Society. He noted that it was largely due the to inadequacy of British Marxists’ study of the 1930s which failed to get in touch with the actual situation in Britain. It put undue emphasis on economic determinism, regarding political attribute as the sole basis for determining everything. It was doomed to fail since the interaction between the idea of culture which was the major English tradition and Marx’s brilliant revaluation was “as yet far from complete”. (Williams, 1966: 280). These ideas constituted the ideological foundation of the British New Left.

The debate over adult education once again became a hot issue after the World War II. The publication of the Beveridge Report (1942), the implementation of Butler’s Education Act (1944), the victory Labour Party won in the 1945 election and post-war reconstruction promoted a rapid expansion of adult education in Britain. More and more people were involved in discussions concerning the purpose, nature and modes of adult education. Under the leadership of the University of Leeds and Oxford, many universities began to establish their own colleges of adult education so as to create more opportunities for young people from poor families. As a result, there was a rapid increase in the number of people who received higher education, and educational patterns as well as construction of knowledge underwent dramatic changes. A large number of intellectuals from lower class actively engaged in the field of adult education, hoping that their work could contribute to reshaping a new democratic Britain. This group became an emerging force against the academic mainstream. Their representatives Hoggart, Williams and E. P. Thompson conducted their own adult education practice at Hull University, Oxford University and the University of Leeds respectively.
Having direct contact with students from middle and lower classes, Hoggart and teachers at the colleges of adult education fully realized the impact of the post-war popular culture on the working class. We witnessed a series of profound changes in the cultural patterns of the working class, and the gulf between their ideology and objectives of the British traditional education were further enlarged. For many educators, an unavoidable fact was that some students had no idea about and showed no interest in the function of language and poetic sentiments. And the bourgeois cultural mode proved weak when facing the real life of the working class. On the contrary, popular publications, pop music and all the things laughed by professors of English Department were what they were most familiar with. As Hoggart said in an interview:

We were very interested, especially if we taught literature, by the fact that our pupils came and usually they learned about “classical” literature in almost the Leavisite sense, but they lived in another world. (Corner, 271)

Under such circumstances, Hoggart and Williams examined this new cultural phenomenon with innate understanding and great sympathy. Abandoning the elitist's condescending attitude, they refuted the stand that ascribed “cultural decline” to the promotion of popular culture by the working class. Many of them were deeply influenced by Leavisism in their early years, however, it was in the practice of adult education, they found that the Leavis’ approach to education fell to adapt to the changing times. As Steele points out:

Absolutely no value is placed on the student's own cultural habits of reading and every value, implicitly, placed on those to which he should aspire [...] he or she is seen as little more than the victim of the siren voices of the commercial press. (Steele, 84)

This educational mode excluded everyday life from the concept of culture, therefore, widened the gap between the two. Recognizing the downside of the Leavist approach, Hoggart, Williams unanimously based their research on the cultural background to which their students belong. They examined their daily life within the domain of cultural connotation, and fought for legitimacy that “mass” culture deserved.

In 1958, Williams challenged the thought in his declaratory article “Culture is Ordinary” that culture is “on the one hand, a remote and self-gracious sophistication, on the other hand, a doped mass”. (Williams, 2001: 24)
subsequent book *Culture and Society*, Williams first explored the denotative meaning of “masses” and the context in which it was used, then questioned the justification of cultural elitism. Williams pointed out:

[...] masses was a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained in its significance: gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit. The masses, on this evidence, formed the perpetual threat to culture [...] There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. (1966: 298 - 300)

Williams refused to use the word “the masses” throughout his life. He also revealed that about what adult education people really wanted there was not the conclusions already reached but the actual process of arguing, from which their own conclusions are based. (Williams, 1989: 165)

Williams recognized the penetrating nature of ideologies in our cultural life by investigating the evolution of the concept of culture, whereas the leftist historian Thompson adopted another approach by inspecting the history of the working class. In his famous book *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson concluded that; social class, especially the working class is a product of society, rather than naturally formed; education plays a key role in this process. He noted that class is “a historical phenomenon”:

Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms; embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. (Thompson, preface)

As representatives of leftist intellectuals, Williams and Thompson based their studies on the dynamic investigation of the concepts of “culture” and “working class” respectively. They disclosed and criticized the cultural oppression the ruling ideology imposed on the working class and groups at the bottom of the social ladder. Their studies were, to a large extent, inspired and motivated by the adult teaching experience. In contrast with them, Hoggart’s engagement in adult education was less politically motivated:

his concerns had been more closely tied to anxieties about the decline of community, the family and working-class values, and more significantly about his own alienation from the community he was raised in. (Steele, 16)

In *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart provides a vivid and detailed depiction of the
life and culture modes of the working-class living at Leeds in the 1930s. He also reveals the features of “new popular culture” as well as its negative impact on the cultural heritage and class consciousness of the working class. Hoggart believed that, as a so-called “classless” culture, mass culture affected every stratum of the society. Working-class and middle-class people often shared the same publications, and class-division became less clear as circulation increased. The working class lost their way in a sugar-coated world created by popular culture, and lost momentum in constructing their own cultural identity. The loss of critical strength make them unaware of the cultural rob behind the sweat tone of “classless culture”, therefore, they were likely to fell victim to commercialization and ideological propaganda. In this regard, Hoggart pointed out: “the chains of cultural subordination are both easier to wear and harder to strike away than those of economic subordination.” (Hoggart, 1998: 187) Hoggart believes the goodness in human nature and nurtured “critical literacy” (1999: 98) can be combined together to resist cultural decline. And the highest goal of adult education is not to provide people with the tools to make a living, but to help people improve their critical literacy. To achieve this goal, we must adopt a down-to-earth attitude, and form our own judgments. Hoggart’s opinion, on this point, once again coincided with that of Williams. In his article “Culture is Ordinary”, Williams also firmly opposes the idea that the purpose of education is job training, or preparing useful citizens in agreement with the existing social system. (Williams, 2001: 21)

By cultivating critical literacy among ordinary people and stressing social and political significance of education, Hoggart and Williams became prominent spokesmen and active practitioners in the field of adult education. In his autobiography, Hoggart recalled his own experience as well as those of Williams, and Thompson as they entered the field of contemporary cultural studies. He stressed:

For me much later, similar implicit but powerful challenges to the definition of my subject-English literature-led me to move out to an area I called contemporary cultural studies [...] That the experience of adult teaching itself shaped and informed the very nature of the works themselves as they developed. (1994: 95 - 96)

It is worth mentioning that the three books which constituted the foundation of British cultural studies were all written in the first half of the 1950s. Although their authors knew each other, they never exchanged views in writing. As to their
unanimous action, Hoggart wrote:

We each had [...] a belief in the need for developed minds and imaginations—especially in wide-open, commercial, pyramidal societies—a sense of the many and major injustices in the lives of working people and so a deep suspicion of the power of class in Britain. Thus we all, in our different ways, started on studies which embodied our interest in cultural change, politics, and communication or lack of communication, between the parts of this greatly divided society. (96)

By reviewing the history and its impact of the British adult education, we can see, on the whole, British cultural studies, as a cultural and political practice, grew out of the 19th century workers' education movement and post-war adult education. As Steele said: "The adult education ‘movement’ was the site of fierce ideological contestation, especially over the definition and value of the term ‘culture’.” (119):

The idea of “Cultural Studies” emerged as a new site of contest between conflicting ideologies of popular education in the years before, during and just after Second World War, until ultimately the Cold War radically shifted the terms of debate.” (73)

As for the rise of Cultural Studies in Britain, Hall pointed out: The attempt to describe and understand how British society was changing was at the center of the political debate in the 1950s, and cultural studies was at this time identified with the first New Left. (12) Hall's way of defining the beginning of British Cultural Studies has been widely accepted, but neither Hoggart nor Williams agreed with this view. They insisted that adult education was the true source of cultural studies.

As stated above, the British cultural studies took its roots in the profound reflecion on the class nature of adult education. Departing from the academic mainstream, many intellectuals actively explored the objectives and responsibilities of adult education. It was in this sense that Steele concluded: “From the embers of the independent workers’ education movement arose the phoenix of cultural studies.” (9)

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