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Article abstract

In the US, the value of liberal arts is in question as neo-liberal reformers push for a more instrumentalist form of higher education. Older traditions of worker education, however, along with more recent university-based labour studies programs, offer a compelling counter-narrative concerning the social and political purpose of higher education. Taking its cue from C.W. Mills' notion of the sociological imagination, labour studies has the potential not only to re-energize the transformational mission of popular worker education, but reclaim the idea of higher education as a public good.

LABOUR STUDIES, THE LIBERAL ARTS, AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT. In the US, the value of liberal arts is in question as neo-liberal reformers push for a more instrumentalist form of higher education. Older traditions of worker education, however, along with more recent university-based labour studies programs, offer a compelling counter-narrative concerning the social and political purpose of higher education. Taking its cue from C.W. Mills' notion of the sociological imagination, labour studies has the potential not only to re-energize the transformational mission of popular worker education, but reclaim the idea of higher education as a public good.

ÉTUDE DU TRAVAIL, ARTS LIBÉRAUX ET IMAGINATION SOCIOLOGIQUE

RÉSUMÉ. Aux États-Unis, la pertinence des programmes en arts libéraux est remise en question, car les réformateurs néolibéraux préconisent une forme d'éducation supérieure plus efficace. Or, des courants plus anciens de formation des travailleurs, ainsi que des programmes universitaires en études du travail récents, proposent une alternative intéressante en ce qui a trait à la mission sociale et politique de l'éducation supérieure. Lorsqu'ils s'inspirent de la thèse de l'imagination sociologique de C.W. Mills, les programmes d'études du travail ont non seulement le potentiel de revitaliser la mission transformationnelle de la formation populaire des travailleurs, mais peuvent mettre en valeur l'idée que l'éducation supérieure puisse être bénéfique pour le public.

I can now hold my own with the finest products of Eton, Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge whether it be in understanding problems of trade and commerce or in the realms of literature, art or music.... I've learned how to analyse government blue books and white papers, and to digest statistics; workshops practices, managerial problems, wage rates, currency problems, social planning, local and national government developments have all become understandable as a result of my studies.... Training in the art of thinking has equipped me to see through the shams and humbug that lurk behind the sensational headlines of the modern newspapers, the oratorical outpourings of insincere party politicians and the dictators, and the doctrinaire ideologies that stalk the world sowing hatred. (quoted in Rose, 1989, p. 605)

These lines come from an active English trade unionist, reflecting in 1931 on what he had learned by taking courses under the auspices of the British Workers' Education Association. The program was initiated in 1903 and funded by universities and various civil society organizations, including trade unions, in the UK. Three things should be emphasized about the sentiment expressed in the quote, which taken together, reveal a more basic and essential point.

First, in these words we find a trade unionist whose imagination and confidence has been fired by a close examination of his own political and economic circumstances. Second, there is a distinctly public charge to his remarks. This is a worker who seems poised to step into the public sphere, and, perhaps, lead fellow workers in a broader critique of the political-economic status quo. Last, there is breadth and depth to the course of study that had emboldened this trade unionist, steeped as it was in the humanities and the social and political sciences. By enabling him to see through “the shams and the humbug” of everyday political discourse to actual problems with actual causes and effects, a *liberal education*—not a narrowly vocational one—changed this student’s outlook on the world around him.

To facilitate engagement with the issues of the day has long been a goal of labour and worker education in the US. However, given both the general political climate and the decline in US union density and power over the last 30 years, unions are reluctant to spend precious time and resources on programs which pursue it. University-based labour studies programs could, then, play a unique role in terms of supplying the resources, the research, and the space — physical as well as cultural — to fill the void. Furthermore, the university system in the US has long claimed as one of its purposes the creation of the kind of engaged citizenry that democracy requires.

But powerful voices from the private sector and in educational policy-making circles are pushing for various measures that will make US higher education more and more instrumental. One could argue that the sort of narrow technical training that many once thought was all the working classes needed and deserved is now being offered up as the future of higher education in the US in general. As a college education becomes more about preparing *for* work, there is less room for the intellectual exploration that is the hallmark of a liberal education. Indeed, it is only through such an education — whether it takes place in a college classroom, a union hall, or a community centre — that we learn to situate the work we do (or are preparing to do) in a deeper understanding of how an economy functions, how politics are conducted, and how the wide range of human experience is measured and valued.

It is precisely these themes that the public university-based labour studies program where I am currently a full-time faculty member places at the forefront. Together with students, most of whom come to the program through building

trades unions, I explore what it means to discover and to use what C.W. Mills (1959/2000) called the “sociological imagination.” While Mills is somewhat out of fashion these days, his straightforward discussion of the basic imperative of politically engaged social theory – that personal biographies, whether characterized by profound struggle or great triumph or something in between, need to be understood in relation to broad structural forces and historical transformations – can be put to productive use in worker education.

Thinking and talking sociologically can lead not only to critical knowledge of how and why the world works the way it does. It can help workers translate the problems they face as individuals or as members of a particular union into *public issues*, around which they, along with others both inside and beyond their union, might mobilize politically. While this shift does not necessarily imply a grand transformation of consciousness, or for that matter a direct route to action, it does represent an educational component of the struggle to create the kind of broad-based solidarity that many, including now the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the largest federation of trade unions in the US) (Greenhouse, 2013), believe is essential to the invigoration of the US labour movement.

Getting there is not simple. Our students often resist the very idea of college, especially when it means liberal arts classes that have no direct impact on their ability to perform their jobs. Furthermore, many of our students, having finally been invited into the apprenticeship program of an established craft union, really feel that they have “made it.” This is understandable. The prospect of a stable union career beats the idea of bouncing around in low paying jobs, without benefits or security. But life as an apprentice is not easy: they wake early, work hard all day, endure long commutes, all for a wage of around US\$13 an hour. They also know that unions are under attack in general, and their union is not as strong as it used to be. All this amounts to pressure, which in turn makes it difficult for students to see beyond their own choices and struggles to grapple with the full weight of historical circumstance that frames both. Here is where incorporating readings, classroom discussions, and activities that encourage the sociological imagination come in.

WORKER EDUCATION AND THE ART OF THINKING¹

During the 1920s, college was beyond the reach of the US working class. Moreover, standard university curricula gave little consideration to the place of organized labour in society. Facing a system biased towards ruling class interests, the organizers of a string of independent, residency-based labour colleges across the country began an experiment that sought to redefine higher education (Altenbaugh, 1983, 1990; Dwyer, 1977; Tarlau, 2011). At institutions such as the Brookwood Labor College in New York State, courses based in the liberal arts and social sciences were geared toward creating a real, effective, and sustainable

working class voice in the public sphere. More ambitiously, the objective was to put labour on an equal footing with the forces of capital so that it could take a leading role in the making of a more equitable society.

The experiment faltered when the depression drained off much of the private support that kept the labour colleges going (Altenbaugh, 1983). But as the federal government responded to the broader social and economic crisis with the programs of the New Deal, education and training for union members quickly gained new importance. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (The Wagner Act) had the most direct impact. By giving the labour movement formal political legitimacy, it spurred the dramatic surge in unionization heralded by the advent of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). With a new legal environment to interpret, and the tactics of collective bargaining to master, there was an immediate demand for educational programs – most of which came to be housed in public universities – that would teach union members and leaders how to navigate modern industrial relations. Thus emerged what one historian called a “utilitarian labor education,” which focused on negotiating skills and tactics, labour law, and the internal administration of a labour union (Dwyer, 1977, p. 188).

The notion that union workers should also get exposure to the liberal arts never disappeared entirely. But in a period when business unionism reigned, a liberal arts education that opened the door to an open-ended critique of the status quo was seen as politically suspect. More practically, such an education meant the re-dedication of resources and time, both of which many thought were better spent on preparing for the immediate and necessary tasks at hand: negotiating contracts, monitoring agreements, and preparing new unionists to do the same. Indeed, as an education director of the AFL-CIO put it in 1962 (as cited in Dwyer, 1977), “liberal education as such is of little interest to the American Labor Movement” (p. 198).

In recent years, the notion that worker education should move beyond the utilitarian has returned, both within university and trade union-based programs. Campus-based struggles to create programs in women’s, black and / or ethnic studies in the late 1960s paved the way for the emergence of labour studies as a credit-bearing discipline, leading to a degree. Here social science and humanities-based curricula examined both the working class’ position in the political and economic system and the particular values of the working class life. But unlike the independent labour colleges of the early 20th century, labour studies programs worked within the established university system.

As neoliberal ideology and policy has gained hegemony over the last few decades, the stakes have risen significantly for the US labour movement. In this context, union-based education programs and university-based labour studies programs are now debating how best to confront both the political assault on unions and the economic onslaught on working Americans. Some university

programs have turned toward independent strategic research into local labour markets and local power structures. As the director of one program put it, “students are less interested in the AFL, and more in sweatshops” (as cited in Bacon, 2004, para. 18). In other words, while labour studies programs have adapted the older imperative of worker education to a new set of political-economic circumstances and to the new demographics of the working class in the US, they are still striving to provide students with a clear sense of the context in which workers’ struggles are currently taking place (Bacon, 2004; Schmidt, 2011).

Union-based education programs are also fighting to adapt to current crisis conditions in the labour movement. There is an emerging consensus among union leaders and activists that in the face of the onslaught on labour a shift in basic strategy is necessary to move efforts away from a “business-service unionism” to a “social movement unionism” that places more emphasis on organizing new members, taking direct action, and joining unions to other institutions and groups fighting for social justice. As Tarlau (2011) has documented, this shift has ignited considerable debate about what kind of education is needed to put movement back in the labour movement. It is a debate that goes back to a difference of opinion between Myles Horton and Saul Alinsky, one that centred, according to Horton, on the “difference between organizing and education” (as cited in Tarlau, p. 373). According to Tarlau, many labour activists and organizers believe, following Alinsky, that the education that mattered the most in the struggle for change happened as working people organized and took action. Others, explained Tarlau, follow Horton in conceiving of education as a more deliberate process of space-making and consciousness-raising that, ideally, should take place before and after the organizing campaign, in addition to during.

But in current conditions, as unions have been forced to cut back on internal educational programs and devote precious resources to organizing, building the capacity for a longer term educational effort is hard even when the theoretical and philosophical commitment to do so is there. As one labour leader put it, “unions are to a large extent about alleviating pain, and the pain has to be alleviated at the moment and the fire has to be put out at the moment” (as cited in Tarlau, 2011, p. 377). While some have questioned trade union leaders’ commitment to education in the aftermath of conservative attempts to undermine the credibility of labour studies departments, there can be no doubt that the current struggle to stay alive has caused the latter to focus on the short term (Schmidt, 2011).

THE VALUE- ADDED UNIVERSITY

As worker-centred educational programs in universities and unions adapt traditions old and new in the face of current political and economic conditions,

the university itself, in particular the *public* university, is doing the same. One could argue that the crisis facing US organized labour is of a piece with the crisis now facing the US public university.

As argued by Christopher Newfield (2011), gains on wages, benefits, security and workplace safety secured through the institutionalization of collective bargaining in the mid-20th century went hand in hand with the opening of access to a quality college education through a state-subsidized system of public universities. After the Second World War, the GI bill (the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) supplied tuition grants and stipends for veterans to attend college. The Higher Education Act of 1965 paved the way for a system of need-based financial aid through grants, work-study opportunities, and low-interest federal loans (Folbre, 2010). These programs put forward an egalitarian ideal which, expressed as far back as the early 19th century by Thomas Jefferson, had rarely been honoured in practice. In 1947, President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education described why *access* to college for workers was important: "If college opportunities are restricted to those in the higher income brackets, the way is open to the creation of and perpetuation of a class society which has no place in the American way of life" (as cited in Folbre, 2010, p.38).

Certainly, the public university – which as noted above, was home to extension programs for trade unionists – was a driver of social mobility (Mumper, 2003). But it was also part and parcel of a social contract that spread out in a kind of virtuous circle from the bargaining power of organized labour to the main institutions of the welfare state. As Nancy Folbre (2010) put it:

Trade unionists called on their brothers and sisters in the working class to unite and organize for change. The increased bargaining power of the wage earners forced many of the concessions of the so-called welfare state. But the early welfare state itself increased solidarity by developing institutions – such as public education and public pensions – that linked the collective welfare of the generations.

This was no golden age. Access was far from universal, and furthermore, the university had its entanglements with the private corporate sector, and with some of the less savoury purposes of the federal state, particularly when it came to research in the name of national defence. But during this time the *mission* of the university was rooted in the idea that it had a broader social utility (Steck, 2003). It not only served the public good, but *was* a public good.

The attacks on the institutions, policy and legislation that together served to regulate the wage relation and the private accumulation of wealth – unions and collective bargaining rights, workplace safety and health, progressive taxation, the regulation of banking and finance, environmental protections, and so on – are only the most obvious expressions of the neoliberal transformation of the US political economy. However, neoliberalism, both as a discourse

and a set of policies and practices, has continued to evolve. Other areas of governance and policy making have now come under enormous pressure to embrace market-based norms (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002). As global competition focuses attention on a fictitious skills gap in the US workforce, and as recession and fiscal austerity at the federal, state and local levels radically pinch capacity for public investment, education is now very much under the gun: slotted, as it were, for “reform” (Foster, 2011).

Like many public institutions, state universities have been squeezed by the decline of government contributions to their operating budgets over the last few decades (Kelderman, 2012; Weissman, 2013). One indication of the trend, and the shift in priorities it indicates, is the fact that many states now spend more on prisons than on universities (Folbre, 2010; Gangi, Schiraldi & Zeidenberg, 1998). Universities have also made their own internal adjustments, becoming more and more like private corporations in the ideology and practice of administration and governance. In relying on an ever-expanding army of adjuncts to carry the instructional load, universities have created the kind of two-tiered labour market that many private sector companies have put in place both to protect the bottom line and to divide workers from within. Administrative departments have been growing at a faster clip than academic ones (Deresiewicz, 2011; Flaherty, 2013; Ginsburg, 2011; Schuster & Finklestein, 2008), and tuition rates have been rising steadily, even in the face of the decreasing value and accessibility of financial aid (Folbre, 2010; Mumper, 2003). Administrators have also been actively exploring ways in which to “commercialize” the institutional life of the university, and not just through big-time athletic programs but in the process of research, especially in the hard sciences (Newfield, 2011; Steck, 2003).

If one understands the present “crisis” in US higher education in terms of the latter’s inability to contribute to a broader public good – indeed, it can be argued that the cost and structure of universities exacerbate the steep inequality that characterizes US society – the above catalogue of retrenchment and corporatization is a straightforward explanation of how it came to pass (McDermott, 2013; Michaels, 2006). But in the dominant discourse that addresses this crisis, very little attention is paid to actual structural determinants. Following the lead of the reform efforts that have encircled public primary and secondary education, federal officials and university boards of trustees point their fingers elsewhere.

Reformers frame the issue by citing data demonstrating how the US now lags behind its global competitors in higher education attainment, which not only puts the US economy in peril but restricts opportunities for US citizens to get the education they need to find jobs in the “new economy.” Looking closer, we can see just how mechanical and economistic the purpose of higher education

has become in the minds of those who are pressing hardest for its “reform.” A major US Department of Education report, entitled *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education* (2006) claimed that the university is now what mainstream economists would call a “mature enterprise.” Mired in inefficiencies, lagging productivity, and out of control costs, universities, says the report, are driven by a head-in-the-sand approach to the reality of the 21st century marketplace.

The solution is taken out of a corporate consultant’s playbook. While a decline in state support and the buying power of financial aid is certainly a problem, we should not expect a return to former levels. So, as the report claims, universities must introduce still more efficiencies (as if all those adjuncts weren’t enough) that bring the sticker price down. They must embrace technology, particularly in the realm of online and distance learning. Perhaps above all else, those who create and deliver the product must be able to demonstrate what new skills have been added to students’ existing stock when they leave college. Colleges must be accountable, in other words, to those paying for that product.

More accountability, in this respect, also means making college more affordable and therefore more accessible. As suggested by the critical response to the report published by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), its authors claim the goal of accessibility in order to defuse criticism – precisely because it is a goal so few can disagree with, at least in the abstract (AAUP, n.d.). But in the discourse of higher education reform, the concept of access has been incorporated into a whole new model that sees education as a social good only so far as it is a marketable good. The purpose of college is therefore entirely geared, as Deresiewicz (2011) put it, “toward the ‘practical,’ narrowly conceived: the instrumental, the utilitarian, the immediately negotiable” (para. 36).

While the report’s recommendations have not been formally implemented, many in university leadership positions interpreted its findings and proposals as a sign of things to come. If anything, the pressure to “reform” through efficiency and accountability measures has become more intense since the recession which followed the financial crisis of 2008 produced a major bump in college enrolments. Things are moving, in quite real ways, towards that instrumentalist vision (Gardner & Young, 2013; Heller, 2013; Lewin, 2013). Haltingly, though, in part because of bureaucratic inertia, but also because the older vision of the social utility of higher education is not going down easily. Eloquent defences of a university education as a public good have appeared both in the press and in book form from writers of various political stripes (Delbanco, 2012; Ferrall, 2011; Nussbaum, 2012; Roche, 2010; Roth, 2012). Moreover, while they have yet to do so in any substantive and organized fashion, faculty has also resisted the trend (Gardner & Young, 2013; Lewin, 2013; Rice, 2012).

LIGHTING A FIRE, NOT FILLING A BUCKET

In *Democracy and Education* (1916/2011), John Dewey took a strong stand against those who argued that narrow vocational training was the only kind of education the working class needed. To perform manual labour jobs, the argument went, was the working class' lot in life. So why go beyond the know-how of operating a machine, or levelling a wall? Dewey was not opposed to vocational education. He was opposed to an educational system that isolated such learning from the kind of learning that allows one to appreciate and understand the meaning of one's work, and how, over time, it relates to other kinds of work, and, perhaps more important, how one's work constitutes and is constituted by a broader set of social and political relationships.

Without the latter, a vocational education would simply slot students into the existing economic system: education to create "human capital" in today's parlance. "Put in concrete terms," wrote Dewey (1916/2011), "there is a danger that vocational education will be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education: as a means of securing technical efficiency in specialized future pursuits" (p. 173). Furthermore, argued Dewey, a form of vocational education "which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and to perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination" (p. 174).

The study of work should still be a part of the educational process. But for Dewey (1916/2011), the point was to expand understanding of one's role as a worker, to see not only how the work one does has evolved over time, but to see how it fits in with broader political and economic relations and patterns. Delving into vocational life in this manner, moreover, could empower workers. They might not only gain control over the development of their own practical skills, but over the setting of longer term social and political purposes those skills might serve. "There is a great difference," wrote Dewey, between a "proficiency limited to immediate work, and a competency extended to insight into its social bearings; between efficiency in carrying out the plans of others or informing one's own" (pp. 173-174).

As Dereciwicz (2011) put it: "Education is lighting a fire... not filling a bucket" (para. 39). No doubt today's reformers would find this sentiment impractical and naive, and would be equally dismissive of Dewey's insistence that education be a means not to perpetuate an unjust society but to re-imagine that society and find ways to make it just. But this is exactly why it is so important to keep this understanding of the purpose of education alive and relevant. This is what we strive to do at the labour studies program where I teach.

Within the broader spectrum of labour education and labour studies in the US, The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies is unique. In 1977, under the leadership of business manager Harry Van Arsdale Jr., Local 3 of

the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers mandated that a college degree must be an integral component of its apprenticeship training program. This speaks to Van Arsdale's longstanding insistence that his members get an education that went beyond technical training. It resulted in the establishment of a Labour College within Empire State College / SUNY, itself an institution founded on the notion that working adults and other "non-traditional" students should be given access to a college education. The apprentices of United Association-Plumbers Local 1 also take courses at the Van Arsdale Center. Local 1 thus joins Local 3 as one of the few trade unions that require a college degree as a condition of journeyman status.

At the Van Arsdale Center, students are offered courses on topics such as collective bargaining and labour law that serve to produce unionists that are knowledgeable about their political and economic rights as unionists. Equally important, they are also offered courses in the liberal arts and sciences. Through the examination of critical approaches to the study of economics, for example, or studies of literature or sociology that deepen understanding of the human condition, we encourage our students to become actively engaged in the issues of the day, and to join substantive discussions about how individuals and groups relate to each other to make a society, for good or ill (Fraser, Merrill, Ramdeholl, Szymanski, & Wells, 2011).

The key word here is *encourage*, for the challenges to making things really click in a sustained way run deep. Although my own practice in the classroom is inspired by the tradition of the Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s discussed above, the work of Horton and Freire (Freire, 1970; Horton & Freire, 1990), and Raymond Williams's writing on his experience as a worker education tutor in the UK (McIlroy & Westwood, 1993), the program itself has to function within all the curricular standards, requirements, and parameters of an established university. Although we strive to structure our pedagogy to meet our students "where they are" and create participatory space, books must still be read and papers must still be written. There is also the resistance expressed by the students themselves. As noted above, they are mandated by union leadership to attend classes at the centre. Many, at least at first, would rather not.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Where does this resistance come from?

At the very least, the union requires that its apprentices attain an Associates' degree in labour studies, which means that they must perform at a basic level academically in a range of liberal arts courses, all of which explore the working class presence in economic, social, and political life. But students come to us with a wide range of academic experience and many are not well prepared for standard college-level work. What is more, they are often worn

out by the physical demands of their occupation, and many have commutes of an hour or more to jobs that begin at 7a.m. Making things more difficult still is the fact that the construction industry is cyclical – layoffs and periods “on the bench” are the stuff of common experience for journeymen. For their part, apprentices are less likely to be laid off, not least because they represent cheaper labour, relative to journeymen. Moreover, many work and often live in the outer boroughs of neoliberal New York City, where the top 10 percent of earners capture over 56 percent of total income (New York City Comptroller, 2012) while the working class that makes the city run struggles to get by.

The apprentices also know that their union, along with the labour movement generally in New York City, is still pretty strong compared to other parts of the country. Many understand the close-knit, craft militancy that has historically characterized unions in building trades. They also know that times have changed. Over the last few decades, the industry has been transformed by “efficiencies” in construction site management. Non-union contractors have succeeded in landing some of the big commercial jobs that have long been the mainstay of union construction, a fact which has led establishment urban planners to call for major concessions from unions on compensation and work rules. Proud and often conservative in political outlook, the unions in the building trades are nonetheless feeling the effects of the more general attack on organized labour in the US (Erlich & Grabelsky, 2005; Freeman, 2000; Martin & Cohen, 2011).

In this context – a field of force structured by the particularities of the construction sector, a labour movement scrambling to stay relevant, and an urban political economy that is increasingly hostile to its working class – it is hard for these apprentices to think much past the next paycheck. Apprentices don’t make a high wage; that comes later, when they achieve journeymen status and provided they don’t get laid off. Many work second and third jobs, and occasionally, a student is forced into homelessness. Although gaining admission into the union represents an important and very real step towards a secure career, coming to college at the Van Arsdale Center often (and understandably) represents an undue burden. Indeed, in their own way our students have internalized the notion that is embedded in the new discourse about the “value” of higher education.

If it is good for anything, the logic goes, college is good for getting one a decent job. But in an important sense the apprentices have already arrived at that. Many have waited for several years after first applying to get into the union, bouncing around in retail jobs, or in the small time non-union sector of the construction industry. Getting that call from the union meant persistence had paid off for them, as individuals. Once in the union, and getting the training they need to do their (comparatively good) jobs, what is the point of college now, they ask?

Furthermore, sometimes the resistance to college-level work takes collective shape. The hyper-masculine culture of the jobsite can combine with what could be called, following Harvey (1995), the “militant particularism” of a skilled craft union. This then masks the hard reality of the basic struggle to find the time and energy for the work of reading and engaging the material at hand. The resistance to college, then, needs to be understood as expression of a class experience, shaped by a context akin to what Earl Shorris (1997) has described as the “surround of force” (pp. 75-82) experienced by the working poor. Inside this surround, where insecurity reigns and imaginative and emotional energy is absorbed by just getting by economically, there is little space for reflection on one’s place in the world.

In a 1954 lecture sponsored by the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults that was later published in a collection of essays, C.W. Mills (2008) declared that the basic purpose of a liberal education for working adults was to create that space for reflection. The idea was to enable students to understand “the burdens of modern life” (p. 117) and thus *not* become surrounded and overwhelmed by them. Although written over 60 years ago, his sociological analysis of how men and women of that generation were in danger of becoming overwhelmed is on point, and not only for the students that I work with but for the broader working class majority in the US (Zweig, 2000).

Mills (2008) framed his suggestions through an account of the historical transformation of the face-to-face public sphere of the pre-capitalist period to the mass public of an industrial society. In the latter, social relations are mediated by large, powerful, and impersonal forces: the bureaucratic state, the expanding market power of private corporations, the mass media. As a result, individual social experience, as it is formed through contact with others, becomes increasingly atomized, broken apart into various milieux, which then become the main source of political and cultural identification for both individuals and groups. The connection and mutually constituting historical relationships between these milieux and broader structural forces become disarticulated, invisible. The modern corporate media have compounded the problem by producing a “general tone of animated distraction, a suspended agitation” (Mills, 2008, p. 114). In the face of all this, commonality, much less social solidarity that reaches beyond the narrow range of specific milieux, becomes difficult to sustain across time and space.

In “metropolitan society” the effects are acute. There, men and women only “know one another fractionally,” in that they tend to spend real time only with the like-minded, with those whose lives follow patterns similar to their own. Mills (2008) points out that residents of 20th century metropolitan society, as a mode of self-defence, develop something similar to what Simmel (1950) described as the “blasé attitude” (p. 409) of the denizens of the late nineteenth century metropolis. But, Mills added, it is much more than this:

As they reach for each other, they do so by stereotype and through prejudiced images.... Each is trapped by his confining circle, each is split from easily identifiable groups. It is for people in such narrow milieux that the mass media can create a pseudo-world beyond, and a pseudo-world within, themselves as well. (p. 116)

Clearly, there are echoes here of Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) analysis of the politically flattening effects of the emergence of a capitalist culture industry; Mills (2008) also parallels Habermas' (1991) account of the breakdown of 18th century political norms in *The Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*. A similar critique might be made of Mills' case as has been made of these other, better known texts: the structures of power have so determined the space for thought and action that there is little room for alternatives. But still, I find it useful in both understanding where my students are coming from, and why the sense of solidarity students feel on the job and through their union, while valuable and hard-earned, can often serve to close off the conversation. The union, it seems, can become a milieu of its own, a "confining circle."

A liberal higher education for working adults, said Mills (2008), should open up the conversation by making connections between the lives of individuals and groups. It should provide a view of the "structure of society" that is invisible from the narrow perspective of particular milieux. In Mills' terms, a liberal education should "turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and rationally open problems" (p. 118). Here Mills is referring to a set of ideas he would later introduce in the introduction to *The Sociological Imagination* (1959/2000). The key to thinking sociologically, according to Mills, was to understand the difference between "issues," matters of public concern rooted in institutional and structural patterns, and "troubles," more private and personal matters rooted in specific milieux.

Following Mills' lead, a liberal arts education becomes a process of cultivating the sociological imagination. It allows us to clear the air of "shams and humbug" that stand in for a truly public debate not only about the "issues," but what the really important issues for working men and women actually are. It allows us to map out the structural determinants of issues, which is to say, it is the kind of *political* education that worker education and labour studies programs have long pursued. Courses in the social sciences are critical, but so too are the humanities, particularly since they are often concerned with locating individual narratives in the wider sweep of human experience. Ideally, the use of the sociological imagination enables understanding of the relationship between our own personal biographies (transpiring in specific milieux, they are something over which we seem to have some control), and the historical events, circumstances, structures, and so on, over which we (at least as isolated individuals) seem not to have much control.

So it is not about taking personal troubles out of the educational process, but about making connections between those troubles and the issues. To take an example from Mills (1959/2000), when one person loses his or her job, it is that person's trouble, perhaps the result of a mistake or a bad choice. Maybe one could do better next time, having learned a lesson. But when millions have lost their jobs, this specific trouble becomes a broader trend, with significant social implications: unemployment. Poverty can be understood as a personal problem or failure, and indeed, in the dominant and often racialized discourse around poverty, it is seen as a kind of pathology. In conversations in my classroom, many students do in fact wonder about the "choices" the poor have made and still make. But when so many – 15% of the US Population (46.2 million) in the US and 21.2% of the New York City population in 2012 (Roberts, 2013) – are officially poor then something else must be going on. It is an issue that demands substantive intellectual inquiry and purposeful public action.

And finally, what about immigration, especially "illegal" immigration? From the perspective of the milieu of a skilled craft union, immigration can be intensely personal: as individuals, those crossing the border are viewed as not only breaking the law, but cheapening our labour if not stealing our jobs, and bilking the system in the process because they don't pay taxes. Through the lens of the sociological imagination, a more open discussion about the actual issues involved can take place, and a more humane narrative emerges. Instead of one-dimensional images of day labourers in the Home Depot parking lot, we get images of rural toilers displaced by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the same treaty that sent so many US manufacturing jobs overseas. Instead of walking threats to "homeland security" and welfare moochers, we see men and women coming to the US for work, not hand-outs. We see contributions – "illegal" immigrants do in fact pay taxes – to an economy and a society, not a drain. We see that the billions spent on border security and immigration control does little besides pad the profits of the defence industry; we see how that money could be better spent shoring up the agencies that are charged with monitoring the labour market, so as to ensure that wages are paid, working conditions are safe, and the right to organize is upheld.

The point is to change the conversation, moving it from "people are poor because they are lazy or made bad choices" to "people are poor because of the way the economy is set up and because of political choices that we as a society have made." Here is an example. In a course called *Class, Race, and Gender* that I have taught and now coordinate, a colleague and I ran a workshop that introduced students to Mills' (1959/2000) distinction between a trouble and an issue. After a discussion of the concepts, we asked students to read a sketch about a young black woman waiting to speak to someone at a crowded Bronx employment office. Were her "troubles" also issues that many others faced

as well, we asked the students? Soon students were drawing off other course readings and ticking from a list of issues: a history of discriminatory housing policy, official neglect of the inner city, joblessness, the lack of affordable childcare and housing. When asked if these issues were their issues, the class responded that they were (Ramdeholl & Wells, 2012).

On immigration, the goal is a similar shift in emphasis. Reflecting on what he had learned in my immigration course in an essay in *Labor Writes*, the student publication of the Van Arsdale Center, one student wrote: “In class, we learned about the economics of corn and how the [Mexican] farmers were out-priced and, therefore, couldn’t afford to produce maize.” In pondering the undocumented workers’ experience, he wondered what it would be like to “cross the desert, a mountain, and travel below a freight car,” and to then pay into a social security system knowing that you would never benefit from it. “After hearing all these stories, and learning more about the issues,” he added, “my personal opinion has softened and I have become more inclusive in my thinking” (The Harry Van Arsdale Center for Labor Studies, 2013, pp. 64-66).

These are small but important steps. When the sociological imagination is engaged, the issues that concern all working people can be identified, analyzed, and understood. The “shams and the humbug” begin to fall away, and the horizon of political possibility expands. We can then begin to make an historically and empirically-grounded argument for a more *inclusive* labour movement. We can make the case for a fair tax structure, and a general re-ordering of political and economic priorities. We can push for living wage legislation and a strengthening of labour law to put an end to wage theft, prevent the harassment of workers that attempt to organize, and enforce safety regulations on the job for all workers, regardless of their status. In our cities, we can re-examine development policy, and begin to consider what the city *we* want would look like. We can describe why we need quality and accessible public education, at all levels, that is dedicated to the fostering of an informed citizenry. This is what labour studies is about. *Pace Mills*, it is what a liberal education is about.

NOTES

1. This section draws from the overview of US worker and labour education in Szymanski and Wells (2013).

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