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ON A CONTRADICTIONARY WAY TO THE 'LEARNING SOCIETY': A CRITICAL APPROACH[1]

Introduction

The current discussion on lifelong learning makes it convincingly clear to us that we live in a 'learning society'. At the same time, it also conveys the irritating impression that we attach very different notions to this label. Is it new knowledge that turns modern societies into cognitive societies and forces each of us to be a life-long learner? Is it the breathtaking speed and nature of social transformation processes, with all their inestimable risks, that threaten us and coerce us to take part in incessant learning? Or is it ultimately our own life 'programme' that has changed -- the biographical constructions that 'reflexive modernity' compels us to adopt, to borrow that almost populist label coined by Beck and Giddens (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990)?

We can obviously sense the changes in modernised modernity with some precision. We experience that macro-sociological transformations are occurring. We also notice that micro-sociality is affected, too. What we are missing, it would seem, is a 'concept' (in the Hegelian sense) that renders these changes transparent for our understanding. The learning society seems to be nothing more than an auxiliary construct -- an aid.

As early as 1995, Richard Edwards pointed out that the reason why the label learning society has acquired so much acceptance is that its conceptual clarity is extremely limited and that very different notions can hide behind it. In a brief analysis of the international debate (see Edwards, 1995), he identifies three dominant types of learning society:

Type 1: The concept of a free, democratic education society which offers all its members the same opportunities to use formal education facilities (which therefore must be expanded accordingly). This concept has been developed mainly by liberal, urban educators in western welfare states in the 1960s and 1970s.

Type 2: The concept of a free education market where various education institutions offer competing learning arrangements aimed at improving people's (vocational) training and raising their level of qualification, and at increasing the economy's competitive strength. This concept emerged during the years of economic uncertainty since the mid-1970s and has been propagated primarily by (conservative) governments and industrial associations.

Type 3: The 'post-modern' concept of open learning networks which are able to foster a wide range of skills and abilities. This concept foresees learners using those networks creatively on a 'self-directed' basis just to satisfy their learning needs according to their own notions.

Edwards noted rather realistically that current practice is dominated by the economic concept of a learning market based on the principle of competition. As a result, the 'equal opportunity gap' between social strata is growing disproportionately, and the goal of achieving a broader mobilisation of yet undeveloped skills and abilities remains unmet. In practice, the egalitarian, democratic ideal of expanding educational institutions and opening them to everyone has, undoubtedly, a smaller basis in a society for self-directed learning than in a society that functions with an underlying structure of entitlement and qualification.

Richard Edwards, however, believes (and in this respect he accords not only with the position of other European experts, as in Gunther Dohmen's noteworthy expertise (1996), but also with the crucial statements in the prominent Delors Report), that neither the further expansion of the formal education system nor a radical commercialisation of educational provision are a solution. Instead, future development must lead to overlapping local, regional, national and global learning networks which people who are interested in learning can use autonomously to examine the structured diversity of the modern world in an open learning environment.

Attractive though this option may sound, it could suffer from analytical weaknesses. The following thoughts are a cautious attempt to fill this 'analytical gap' and to illustrate by means of a developed conceptual framework what characterises a learning society of the future and what research issues are raised on the way to this goal. My thesis is that learning societies are not characterised (or at least not exclusively) by changes at the social macro-level, ie the level of social system, nor by the fact that micro-sociality -- the individual, biographic activity of social actors -- is undergoing change. Instead, I am convinced that we must focus much more social scientific attention on the meso-level, on institutional and non-institutional learning environments, and that the perspectives of the learning society are determined at this level.

However, I consider it essential that macro-social changes are at least referred to. I do this in Section 1, in which I try to provide evidence for a kind of 'post-modernisation of society'. My theoretical references are less the well-known diagnoses of our age produced by Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck, which I am sceptical about as far as their empirical basis is concerned, but rather some studies in the tradition of Bourdieu, particularly since I was myself involved in a major empirical social structure study that drew heavily on Bourdieu's theory. [2]

In Section 2, I shall define the micro-social changes with greater precision and attempt to substantiate the thesis of a 'biographisation of the social'. This idea derives similarly from many years of empirical research.

In Section 3, I focus on the redefinition of the 'meso-level' to which I have already referred. Its special nature is due to much more than its range. There is no doubt that it operates below the state or the market, but above the action targets of individual actors. Its special nature consists in a change that affects institutions, enterprises and non-institutionalised publics alike, a change that could be termed the 'informalisation trend'. Drawing loosely on Antonio Gramsci and Jurgen Habermas, I should like to outline the perspectives of such informalisation trends more precisely, and render them useful for the concept of the learning society.

Finally, in Section 4, I want to summarise the insights obtained, in the form of three theses that may be read as future research foci for adult education research (from my highly subjective viewpoint, of course).

1. The macro-social challenge: 'Postmodernisation' of society

If there is one issue that has lent wings to adult education research in the post-war period, it is the question of the 'non-public' of organised adult education, as Filippo de Sanctis (1988), the Italian adult education theorist, used to call it; the analytical search for those members of society who keep away -- either deliberately or through lack of information -- from the adult education programmes publicly on offer.

The fact that this question has managed to occupy research interest in a number of countries since the late 1950s, including Scandinavia, Great Britain, Germany and France, was due to a specific hegemonial constellation that no longer arose in the decades that followed -- at least not in such a form -- namely a somewhat unusual alliance between social-democratic reformism and capital's drive to modernise both itself and society (see Friedeburg, 1994). What one side envisaged as an emancipatory opportunity for personal growth, especially for the working classes, was seen by the other side as the benefits of having the wide-ranging skills within the workforce that were considered essential if Europe was to remain competitive against the USA on the world market. This joint initiative produced ideas like 'second chance education' from Scandinavia to Austria, from the 'Open University' in Britain to the '150 hours' project in Italy.

The impulse generated by these reforms did indeed change the respective societies of northern and central Europe. In my own country (my comments are based on figures for West Germany prior to unification), the percentage of working class children who go on to study at universities has more than quadrupled since the early 1950s, from just 4 per cent to almost 18 per cent (see Vester et al, 1992, pp 169f). The proportion of women in higher education -- certainly another indicator of reform -- virtually tripled over the same period from 14 per cent to 39 per cent (ibid).

In Scandinavia we are witnessing developments that are sometimes even more radical than this, or, for example in Great Britain or France, more gentle. The tendency is clearly apparent. Educational reforms are opening the social space in European societies and mobilising and modernising social structures (see Figure 1). Adult education plays a crucial role in this process, frequently acting as a catalyst for educational processes that lead into the institutions of higher education.

No major theory in Europe has explained this process more succinctly than Pierre Bourdieu's (see Bourdieu, 1979, in particular). But none has been so ruthless in taking the wraps off the ambivalence inherent in this development. Reading Bourdieu helps us to understand what the educational reforms have actually brought about. His concept of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1983) has rendered the complexity of social change more transparent. Once we realise that no man or woman is situated in the social space purely according to his or her economic capital assets, then education can be assigned the value and significance it actually has as a factor in social change. Because we possess different kinds of 'capital' besides the economic, namely cultural and social capital, the total volume of which ultimately assigns us to our place in society.

In a well-known television interview, Bourdieu used the metaphor of a casino. We gamble not only with the 'black chips' that represent our economic capital. We also use the 'blue chips' symbolising our cultural capital, our exams and titles, what we know about people, about our minds and bodies, about art and society. The 'red chips' are perhaps the social capital we possess, our 'connections', the social access to resources that not everyone has. Taken together, all these different sorts of chips form our 'capital'.

I am introducing this rather simple 'exercise' in order to awaken our senses to the kind of changes that the educational reforms of the last 30 years have brought about in Europe. Adult education played a key role here, not just because it brought about upward educational mobility, but also because parents were encouraged to envisage

educational pathways for their children that were out of bounds to themselves and their own parents. This effected a shift in placements within the social space --from lower right to centre left.

Working class children could suddenly become teachers or social workers, technical employees or medical technologists. Sons and daughters from the petty bourgeoisie could rise to become university professors. The feeling of being able to change society through education seemed to be substantiated by the facts. In many European societies in that period --we are referring to the 1960s and 1970s -- there was a special kind of euphoria that 'anything is possible' (Friedeburg, 1994). New perspectives appeared to be opening up without difficulty.

The intoxication of this reformist euphoria did not survive the cohorts that profited directly from its impacts. Bourdieu's theoretical framework is useful here, too, for understanding where the surprising ambivalences lay. Those who are granted the opportunity to acquire educational titles that their parents could not even dream of experience two disturbing things:

- Academic titles shed value in proportion to the extent they are acquired by these people and others like them. The supply of 'blue chips', if you like, has swollen artificially as a result of government policy. Therefore, their 'market value' has fallen sharply. The social prestige of teachers or even university professors -- traditionally very high in all European societies after World War II -- has shrunk considerably: a classical example of inflation (see Alheit, 1993; 1994a).
- Acquiring the title has by no means provided an 'entry ticket' to the 'better society'. Many of the upwardly mobile notice that they have left behind the milieu they stem from, but are not at all at home in their new social surroundings. They are made to feel, or they notice intuitively, that a title does not guarantee the habitus that was classically associated with it. In many cases, those who have climbed the ladder feel socially out of place. They come to realise that distinction is something beyond mere titles.

The successor cohorts -- Bourdieu calls them 'the bamboozled generation' -- are harder hit. They might have the chance to acquire recognised titles, but the jobs to go with them no longer exist. The labour market closes precisely at that locus where the social space had opened a decade before: in the 'human services' and particularly in the educational field. Many university departments, in the humanities and social sciences at least, discharge their graduates into the ranks of the unemployed (see Alheit, 1995).

Adult education is doubly afflicted by this trend. First, entry into the labour market is generally made more difficult for people with academic qualifications. The long process of scientisation and professionalisation is obviously slowed down. Second, openings in public service are increasingly scarce due to budgetary constraints. Academic careers have been replaced by 'social loopings' (see Alheit, 1995), and educational reforms have degenerated into orgies of public spending cuts. Equality of opportunity in society has not improved in the slightest (Alheit, 1993). Even if specific 'cleavages' have shifted position, class society is by no means eradicated.

However, 'class society' has actually acquired a new function. Classes have ceased to be milieus that convey social morals and which give people a home in society. Social origins have more or less degenerated into a mere resource for the coerced creation of new biographical perspectives -- temporary and fluctuating identities (see Alheit, 1994a).

This indicates a kind of post-modernisation' of society Classical modernity's recognition of societal inequalities and its essential aim of eradicating these through 'enlightenment' is covered over and obscured by an untrammelled process of differentiation. This is manifested by, at least, two new and symptomatic constellations that are worth analysing and which could prove of major importance for the future development of European adult education research:

- a kind of pluralisation of class society, involving some surprising effects; and
- the tendency of knowledge diffusion in the so-called 'cognitive society'.

The pluralisation of class society

It is no chauvinism on my part if I cite my home society in order to illustrate this symptom. The reason I do this is, as I mentioned before, that I was involved in a larger analysis of social structure in the former state West Germany that tried to embark on new methodological pathways, so for that reason I am well acquainted with the German context. However, I am also convinced that the key findings of this study hold true not just for Germany, but are general symptoms of social modernisation within the majority of modern European societies.

What is astonishing first of all is the observation that the main strata of West German society -- the upper, middle and lower strata -- have not undergone any dramatic shift over the last 70 years or so. A distinctive and relatively unchanged upper-class habitus is evident for about 20 per cent of the population who possess a deeply rooted conviction of being predestined, unlike the 'masses', for social leadership roles. Of the population, 50 to 60 per cent display the middle-class habitus, the pretentious ambition of 'being somebody' and to actually achieve this end through hard work. The worker habitus is followed by 20 to 30 per cent, a mentality that adapts and conforms to what is necessary and constrained, within which framework the available opportunities to enjoy life and conviviality with others are indeed lived out and actually realised (see Vester et al, 1993; Alheit et al, 1994).

This 'conservatism' of social structure contradicts the fact that the inner coherence of the various strata has clearly relaxed. Milieus with their own internal life have developed from the old class fractions. And the traditional class boundaries, which run vertical, are joined by horizontal 'cleavages' that are perhaps even more effective at creating distances between social groups. Differentiation occurs via modernisation processes that are difficult to link to the conventions of the classical strata. The dimension of 'self-realisation' is one element that lends these processes a certain dynamic, in contrast to established traditions. Modernised milieus are on the rise, whereas traditional milieus are shrinking. In other words, social integration and systemic integration are drifting further and further apart. Attachment to specific social positions is losing the aspect of 'estates' that Max Weber (1964, pp 683ff) sees capitalist societies as still possessing (see Beck, 1992). The feeling of belonging is no longer derived from the attributes 'income', 'title', 'rank' and 'prestige' alone, nor, as a matter of course, from class experience in the 'moral economy'. Particular lifestyles, gender- and generation-related experiences can substitute for them and indeed become temporarily predominant (see Kreckel, 1992) -- undoubtedly a sort of postmodernisation of society'.

The apparently stable social status that someone possesses is defined reflexively to an increasing extent. In itself, it does not guarantee any rights to a particular place or to integration in a (post)modern society. The significance of education -- even where its effects are contradictory or indeed inflationary -- has heightened sensitivity to the right to self-realisation and has led to a cultural focus and an orientation to consumption even where financial resources are tight. Nevertheless, this substantiates the basic importance of adult education and certainly qualifies all-too-pessimistic perspectives.

Knowledge diffusion

The gradual change from class society to the 'lifestyle' or 'event society' (Schulze, 1992) has also altered social knowledge. Knowledge is no longer a secure fundus, or a resource comprising a clear hierarchy of meanings, but rather a phenomenon that is dependent on its contexts. If we look at the latest picture from the ongoing analysis of milieus in Germany, the impression is created of a confused landscape of mentalities that, each for itself, have both inclusive and exclusive impacts simultaneously. The classical 'us down here and them up there' metaphor used with effect by the labour movement to mobilise its constituents has long become obsolete as a description of one's location in the social fabric. Mutually excluding milieus have come into being both 'down here' and 'up there'. Social inequality possesses not only a 'ranking bias',

but also a 'lifestyle dynamic'.

The hedonism of the young generation conflicts with the conservatism of old people, regardless of whether the young in question are higher or lower in the social rankings. Women's lifeworlds compete with male views of reality, with women professors and secretaries demanding their rights. The 'contextuality' of knowledge is becoming a fashionable phrase, with opinions being generated in 'discourses' hermetically sealed off from each other, such that any shared understanding between the diverse social worlds would seem to arise more by chance than anything else. Lyotard's (1979) prediction that we have lost the 'meta-narratives' of modernity has been subsequently corroborated, it would seem.

What this also means is that the euphemistic notion of the cognitive society fails at its own scientific roots to make real sense. In late modernity, scientific knowledge itself has lost its function as a source of orientation (see Beck, 1996; Alheit, 1994a). The scepticist realisation that science must waive any final value judgements because it is no longer capable of providing the truth is something we owe to Max Weber. We now know that even Weber's trust in the correctness of scientific methods is no longer tenable for us. The decision as to what is 'scientifically' correct depends not on innerscientific consensus, but on the specific contexts in which such knowledge is applied. Scientific arguments are advanced not only by the champions but also by the opponents of nuclear power. Both sides lay claim to the scientific seriousness of their positions. The 'struggle between demystified gods' that Weber believed scientists should keep away from has been waging within the scientific community itself. The fashionable distinction between fundamental and applied research appears as a futile attempt to preserve the 'purity' of scientific enterprise. Such attempts fail because 'pure' research is infected by the same virus as 'applied research'. A major proportion of scientific activity takes place far away from the 'freedom and isolation' of academic institutions, in the research laboratories of the military-industrial complex. One can also calculate the time it takes for allegedly non-purposive knowledge to be boiled down to possible applications see Alheit, 1994a, pp 146ff).

The diffusion of knowledge becomes apparent to all through the dramatic spread of information technologies in the second half of our century. For individuals, the media worlds they generate form a kind of 'second-grade reality' that is starting to make the boundaries to social reality increasingly blurred. Reality TV and computer games, the Internet and cyberspace have a tendency to cause extreme losses of reality and to obliterate the experiential world of social agents. In the picture puzzle of a gradual, insidious virtualisation of perception, the cognitive society is threatened by the 'agony of the real', as predicted by Jean Baudrillard (1983) almost 20 years ago.

Knowledge appears to have become something arbitrary, and its distribution is a matter of chance to an astonishing degree. If the ability to use the new media varies dramatically with age, if young computer virtuosi can easily hack their way into the host computers of banks, multinationals or even the Pentagon, the result may be an endearing type of anarchy, but it also means that the dependability or reliability of knowledge in the modern age is undermined. Here, too, post-modern fragmentation seems to be the consequence.

Does this signify the 'deconstruction of the subject', as Derrida claims -- in other words the final dissolution of modernity that originated in Descartes' cogito ergo sum equation? Is the learning society losing its classical protagonist, the learning individual? I take a very sceptical view here as well, for empirical reasons, and thus come to my second train of thought.

2. The micro-social challenge: 'Biographisation' of the social

There is no doubt whatsoever that the conditions in which social subjects act -- the biographical action environments, to use a Parsonian term -- have undergone drastic change, particularly in the opening corridor of the social space I have already described. Elsewhere (Alheit, 1996), I have provided a detailed analysis of three crucial symptoms related to the change in biographical action environments, namely:

- an erosion of traditional lifeworlds;
- a breakdown of classical milieus; and
- a disappearing of 'normal' life course scripts.

One of the surprising results of this analysis is the recognition that reactions on the individual level are obviously less dramatic than we would expect. The path from systemic diffusions to a dramatic crisis of biographical action is a long one. Even the step from challenging experiences to new patterns of biographical construction seems to be more complicated than contemporary sociologists suppose. The reason for this is the theoretically highly interesting observation that the reaction to the collapse of environments is not necessarily a 'panic' reaction, but can include the rebuilding of action environments. In other words, the interdependency of action and action environments is not unilinear, but double-poled. Biographical activities may be transitional in nature. They reconstruct collapsing environments at a new level.

In many years of biographical research with social groups exposed to risk -- young unemployed persons, women after divorce, teachers without work, migrants, epileptics and MS patients, homosexuals and young computer freaks -- we were able to identify certain strategies with which these people successfully combat the symptoms of erosion and breakdown referred to above. We found three highly interesting biographical coping patterns that I should like to outline in brief:

- the pattern of biographical 'networking';
- the pattern of biographical patchworking; and
- the strategy of biographical 'designing'.

Networkers are biographical engineers who react in a particularly sensitive way to the erosion of their former lifeworld. The disintegration of the family system and the immediate social nexus is processed actively at the biographical level. The result is not necessarily the neurotic attempt to cure everything, but more often the unpretentious effort to find a replacement. For example, we can observe many women after a divorce who preserve the inter-generational kinship networks of the 'old' family, and not merely for the sake of their children. We see that they construct completely new networks and that they fix 'matrilinear' relationships in the generational sequence of both their own and other families. This leads to new traditions, new obligations and new certainties (see Hagestad, 1989).

We have also discovered that innovative lifeworld networks can develop within the new social movements, although within narrower limits, clearly contrasting, by the way, with the more vociferous ideologies of the 1970s. Examples here are various communitarian projects, children's initiatives, or building and shopping co-operatives (see Effinger, 1990). But here, too, women dominate the activities. Networkers are female. This fact must be clearly stated in the face of changing male identity. The erosion of lifeworlds is treated in a biographically active form by women.

Patchworkers invent biographical constructions against the threatening consequences of social differentiation and the loss of social integration in traditional milieus. Their strategy commonly consists in organising milieu-switching as a kind of biographical sequencing. We find examples of this particularly among upwardly mobile males who, unwillingly, progress from one qualification pathway to another without ever testing out the 'market value' of the various certificates acquired (Alheit, 1995). This leads to moratorium cycles at progressively higher levels, where 'the sky's the limit'. Those strategies probably owe their biographical attractiveness to the fact that such passages are not 'individualised', but are traversed in new peer groups, so that loss of solidarity can be compensated by new patterns of social integration that are, of course, less binding in nature.

However, there are also the typical female patchworkers. At a first glance, these are 'hoppers' between employment and family phases in biography. If we observe this group more closely, we also see how they gradually detach themselves from their background milieus and how they frequently achieve quite astonishing leaps in

qualification level (see Schluter, 1993). But again, the way they go is no 'career', the experiences they make in various passages are 'in relation'. It could almost seem as if patchworking is an alternative integration strategy for coping with the breakdown of social backgrounds involved in upward social mobility -- ambivalent as it is for both men and women. How this process affects biography is completely open, both socially and individually.

The third and final type, namely designers, are biographical engineers for whom the openness of social space has become the design principle for their biography. They have established the greatest distance from the 'normal' life course scripts and utilise the free space provided by the 'artificiality' inherent in the biographies of upwardly mobile. They are no longer 'narrators', but collage artists. Designers stage and aestheticise their own biography: the relationship to their parents, brothers and sisters, their hetero- and homosexual passions, their sophisticated preferences (see Scheuermann, 1994). Designers are hedonists. They utilise their biographies as a stage.

We find this group in the most recent milieus of western societies, among homosexuals, ravers and computer freaks. It is difficult to establish at first whether such self-stylisations represent a mere transitional phase, part of a temporary lifestyle as it were, or whether they conceal new and increasingly independent patterns for the biographical processing of reality.

What is striking, however, is that a cautious separation of concrete biographical actions from their action environments is apparent in the very presentation of these three types of construction. The basic assumptions of classical socialisation theories, namely that social expectations can be linked to individual needs, are thrown into question. Parsons' pattern variables fail to operate. System integration and social integration drift apart. There is also increasing evidence to suggest that it is the individuals themselves who have to create their own action environments on their own terms first of all.

In his later works, in which he drew on and developed the radical biological constructivism of Humberto Maturana, Niklas Luhmann described similar phenomena as the autopoietic performance of self-referential personal systems (see particularly Luhmann, 1984). For all the critical distance to systems theory that I maintain as a biographical researcher, I have to admit that Luhmann's analysis is supported by a number of empirical observations. What we are dealing with in the case of the coping patterns described in the foregoing are not just simple reactions to macrosocial changes, outputs that occur in predictable ways in response to social inputs, but in a certain sense with 'intakes', with forms of coping that are primarily determined not by the social impulse, but by an extant logic of biographical experience (see Alheit, 1997; Alheit and Dausien, 1999). Just as Maturana's organisms respond to 'perturbations' in their environment according to their own inner logic, as opposed to the laws of that external environment, so, too, do modern biographies process social change according to the 'logic' of amassed self-referential experience, not the patterns generated by systemic functionalities (see Maturana and Varela, 1988).

There are, of course, historical dimensions to this observation. The individual in traditional societies was still an integral part of society as a totality, and biographical reality was not yet a distinct phenomenon alongside the individual's social reality, whereas these spheres diverge in modernity, are unable to combine without generating problems, and may indeed come into a precarious conflict with each other in late modernity. The discoveries of symbolic interactionism, the highly interesting reconstructions of the 'society within us' (see Mead, 1934), provide indications in this respect. If such insight into the 'sociality' of the biographic is one of the central discoveries of 'classical' modernity in industrial society, then perhaps the 'biographicity of the social' is a major discovery of the second, 'reflexive' modernity.

However, this does not imply in any way that there is no longer any relationship between the individual and society, that post-modern arbitrariness is supplanting the understanding and shaping of our social future. What it does mean, however, is that a risk-laden gap is opening up between the human-centred shaping of the total and the

autonomous self-realisation of the individual. The post-modernisation of society and the biographisation of the social are contradictory learning processes at first that do not automatically end in a utopian learning society.

3. The opportunities provided at the 'meso-level': civil public spheres as new learning environments

I will admit at once, of course, that these insights are by no means absolutely new for educationalists. In a certain sense they belong to the everyday business of the well-informed adult educator. We find statements of a similar bent in the Delors Report (Delors, 1998), for example. Its 'banner', Learning: The Treasure Within, could well be understood as a tribute to the 'networkers', 'patchworkers' and 'designers' I have been talking about. 'The idea of lifelong learning,' writes John Field in a recent paper, 'draws attention not to education or training -- traditional domains of policy makers -- but to learning, which is undertaken by individuals and organisations without much involvement by the state. A policy approach based on learning will be radically different from one based on education and training.' (Field, 1998, p 1) The stimulating and pioneering study by Paul Fordham (Fordham et al, 1979), which dates back almost 20 years, provides excellent insights into the socio-political importance of informal learning. The peculiar euphoria attached to the British Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning concept (AP(E)L), also in other European education systems, is another indication of this. Members of the 'fan club' for informal learning range from management consultants to alternative adult education initiatives. Sensitisation to an informalisation of the entire adult education domain is thus an indisputable phenomenon.

Yet here, too, the devil is in the nuts and bolts. The APEL debate is an instructive case in this respect. The problem is not the 'discovery' and 'acceptance' of informal learning, but rather its evaluation. This presupposes more precise notions about the extent to which informal learning can be operationalised. Quite obviously, it is not enough for emphatic educationalists to emphasise the benefit or usefulness of informal learning, perhaps with reference to Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge'. The British example shows us how crucial it is that self-reflexive objectifications of one's own learning experiences be made visible in some sense. This 'accounting to oneself' must then be subjected to certain assessments -- namely an evaluation concept with a strong political bias.

So far, all power has been in the hands of those on the receiving end of informal learning. They have the capacity to determine which informal prerequisites are useful and which are not. In the process, the newly discovered forms of learning run the risk of being instrumentalised and exploited. A more precise analysis, particularly of the vocational training system, shows that although this selective power is legalised as a rule, it is by no means legitimised. In the German system of vocational training, for example, it is never disclosed why or how a particular form of entitlement to participate in segments of the labour market, and the abundance of regulated training procedures that this generally involves, is related to subsequent processes of work, utilisation and learning. The precondition for integrating informal learning processes, however, would be that companies or continuing education institutions that link entry to specific evidence of entitlement reveal and justify their particular requirements. Only then are applicants given the chance to adapt their learning profiles to the perspectives of those on the 'customer' side, and to integrate any potentially important informal skills in a meaningful way. As long as the vocational training system merely regulates, while in essence lacking any legitimation, there is a risk of uncontrolled exploitation.

What we are obviously facing here is the political core of the learning society debate. Major projects fired by a certain theoretical understanding of society (as in the 1960s and 1970s) are not the central issue here, but rather the realisation that informal learning in modern societies can unfold its quality only if the intermediary locations for learning (companies, organisations and educational institutions) change in parallel, if genuinely new learning environments and new learning publics come into being. A generally accepted informalisation of learning cannot be achieved without democratisation.

Now there are indeed some highly developed concepts that attribute outstanding significance to this rather self-willed intermediary level. Gramsci's idea of a *società civile* (see Gramsci, 1977), a civil society, provides impulses in this respect that are just as important as Habermas's concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, or 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1962). Both sets of proposals are based on communicative processes of consensus-building that are neither state-regulated nor economically instrumentalised. Another factor common to both is that they do not isolate the intermediary level within civil society, but relate instead to real social conflicts and debates. Gramsci speaks, from a more militant stance than Habermas -- of 'wars of position' for cultural and political hegemonies, while Habermas uses the term 'deliberative politics', the capacity of civil associations to achieve their ends with arguments.

In 1997, Neil S. Smelser, the influential American sociologist, gave a series of lectures on the state of the art in current sociology while he was the incumbent of the Georg Simmel guest professorship at the Humboldt University in Berlin. One of the key points he made was a prediction that 'if we do not keep our eye on the meso level, we are likely to be ignoring the most important features of the society of the coming decades...' Smelser uses the term meso level to refer to the self-same intermediary processes in social life, juxtaposed between the macro and micro levels, in which Gramsci and Habermas are also interested. They are 'the heart and soul of civil society'.

Adult education in virtually all Western societies has its origins in this sphere. Over the last hundred years, however, it has increasingly become either a vehicle for implementing state control, or indeed a market instrument. The diffusion and postmodernisation of macro-level structures and the surprising growth in the importance of the micro level are now generating an opportunity to root adult education in civil society. There are already some highly interesting examples of this.

In the process by which titles have become devalued, especially those in the 'human services' and educational sectors, more and more university graduates in Europe are compelled to define new fields of professional practice themselves. After graduation, they gather experience in initiatives, non-profitmaking associations and the like. More and more work on a freelance or self-employed basis. Some set up staff-managed associations organised along quasi-co-operative lines. In Austria, Germany, Denmark or the Netherlands, for example, these co-operatively structured organisations have developed into an important segment of the labour market and a terrain on which social science and teacher training graduates can gain practical experience (see Korber and Effinger, 1995; Korber, 1998).

A professional action sphere gradually ensues between private households and informal communities, on the one hand, and the public spheres of the market and the state, with their formal organisations of companies and public administration, on the other. New organisations of this kind may be conducted like public institutions or private-sector enterprises, but they do not perform any state functions, nor do they have a definite commercial purpose (see Alheit, 1994a, pp 77ff).

The protagonists of these new, intermediary forms of work perform their person-related services in the educational, social and health care fields with such success because they mostly operate outwardly as 'staged communities'. The traditional primary communities, such as family, neighbourhood and organic milieu, are partly supplemented and partly substituted by them. Such tasks can no longer be performed en passant within the complex framework of housework and family work, through voluntary commitment or sporadic unpaid labour, as used to be the case.

How symptomatic and crucial this development could be is shown by the fact that traditional institutions such as schools, evening schools, theatres or broadcasting companies are also starting to take on intermediary functions (Korber and Effinger, 1995, p 343). The relationship between 'producers' and 'consumers' of the respective services is 'de-hierarchised' in the process. The user of such services is viewed less and less as a client, in the original sense of ward, ie as a dependent and unknowing pupil, a recipient of aid, a person affected or in need of care, and instead as an

autonomous and knowing customer, who is also actively involved in the production of the service in his or her capacity as co-producer.

What we are already seeing here are elements of the 'New Way' with which adult education could reach its public, and the public change itself as part of a civil Öffentlichkeit. An interesting aspect here is that a model is developing in response to scarcity, and not as an artificial academic construct.

It is true, of course, these are still rather marginal phenomena at present, and that the informalisation of the classical meso-level institutions, the actual organisations, enterprises and associations, is still in its infancy. Yet the thesis I am propounding is that it is precisely here that the tasks and the opportunities of the learning society lie; in a civil bargaining process, it is essential to fill and shape the important space between systemic macro-structures and the biographical micro-world, two spheres that are drifting further and further apart. This involves not only risks of systemic monopolisation, but also and without doubt interesting perspectives for a new civil public sphere.

I would like to conclude by summarising my analytical observations in the form of three theses that I consider to be research desiderata for adult education in the years to come.

4. Outlook: three theses

Thesis 1: The idea of the learning society is not a concept divorced from the political, but represents a programme for civil publics that have to be further developed and newly shaped in institutions and enterprises, urban districts and associations, in trade unions and co-operatives. It bears a greater affinity to traditions like the 'study circles' in Sweden or the 'associazionismo' in Italy than to the discourse in the USA on self-directed learning. The crucial legitimation for a learning society in this sense derives from the collapse of systemic integration and social integration in the advanced societies of Western Europe and North America, and in the transitional societies of Central and Eastern Europe. How to fill this gap is thus an empirical research issue as well. The notion of popular adult education suggests the beginnings of an empirical focus on similar issues. The debate on the significance of social capital in social learning processes, initiated by Tom Schuller (1998) in particular, would be another interesting research variant.

Thesis 2: We are observing a paradigm shift away from the concepts of education and training towards the concept of learning, in other words from a 'system-controlled' to a 'learner-controlled' notion of education and training. This has impacts on adult education in everyday practice. We must abandon classical 'pathways' in education and hermetic qualification cycles, and invent more flexible, more informal ways of learning. To achieve this, we first need in-depth research on the educational biographies of the most diverse target groups, on their very specific constructional achievements in the face of social change (Alheit and Dausien, 1996). Second, we need a more precise concept for the 'modularisation' of useful qualification assets. The qualifications of learners are increasingly constituted as a kind of 'patchwork' or 'mosaic'. It must therefore be possible to acquire parts of this patchwork in very different ways and in very different phases of biography (Alheit et al, (eds) 1998). There is a lack of research here on the 'matching' of informal skills and formalised expectations on the part of institutions and enterprises regarding the 'elementarisation' of social learning.

Thesis 3: It has never been more apparent than nowadays that neither syllabi nor didactic expertise provide a guarantee for participant-oriented education. Instead, autonomous development on the part of the learning subject is enabled by learning environments. And learning environments include economic and social structures. We are familiar with the latent middle-class bias of informal learning settings. We know that 'learning companies' or 'learning organisations' (Jones and Hendry, 1994) do not adopt a more open and inviting attitude vis-a-vis educationally excluded groups, but a more defensive stance instead. We therefore need the courage to pursue educational alternatives in this area as well. Debate on a civil sector (Alheit, 1997, 1998) or a 'civilian's society' (Beck 1996) are starting points at best. In order to test them out,

the learning society needs discourses and controversial debate, real utopias and 'future workshops'. What it needs above all are agents drawn from both the scientific community and everyday life. Both are equally important.

Notes

[1](#) *Modified version of a keynote speech given to the 2nd ESREA Research Conference 'Learning to Live in a Learning Society', Brussels, September 1998.*

[2](#) *A large-scale study led by Michael Vester, a political scientist at Hanover University, Germany (see Vester et al, 1993). My function in this context was to head a study on new lifestyles among young people (see Alheit et al, 1994).*

[3](#) *Broadcast on German television (ARD) in 1987.*

[4](#) *Unpublished lecture 1997, p 34.*

[5](#) *Ibid.*

DIAGRAM: Figure 1: A simplified version of Bourdieu's social space

DIAGRAM: Figure 2: The opening of the social space

DIAGRAM: Figure 3: Map of milieus in the contemporary German society

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