Adult Educators, Adult Education and Progressive Social Movements

Gordon Asher interviews Stephen Brookfield

Stephen Brookfield, Distinguished University Professor, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, is one of the pre-eminent writers and thinkers in the field of adult and continuing education. Having worked in England, Canada, Australia and the United States, he is an author of books on adult learning, teaching, critical thinking, discussion methods and critical theory, most recently 'The Power of Critical Theory for Adult Teaching and Learning'. He was recently in Glasgow giving a lecture and seminar on 'Adult Education as Political Detoxification', where Gordon Asher caught up with him.

GA: What has been your involvement and roles within progressive social movements?

SB: I've never been involved with a long term social movement that has had a major structural transformation as its success. But that's probably what 99.99% of people involved in movements would say, as there has been no major structural transformation of capitalism or white supremacy or other targets.

GA: If we were to define social movements as only those that made that kind of impact we might not be left with too many? Perhaps we have to consider their cumulative effects over time and the good that they may well have achieved – the broader impact made across society? Which movements have you been involved with?

SB: It's varied depending on where I've lived. For the last twenty years I've been in the States – in New York for ten years and now in Minneapolis. In New York where we lived was historically the main street in Harlem and so there were lots of community-based movements – mostly, at least for an adult educator – which grew out of work in literacy, some of which were sponsored by the Board of Education, others of which were run by community members themselves. That fitted in very well with what I saw as the history of American adult education, where so much of the early activism came through teaching Blacks to write in order to register to vote – Myles Horton, St. John's Island and all that kind of work. Also in Harlem, and I think up in the Bronx too, there was a lot of community organising around health issues because in the States there's over 48 million with no health insurance, not to mention the under-insured – it's incredible! To me it seems like the best hope for some kind of revolutionary transformation because it's so clearly connected to capitalism – and it's something that touches everybody at a very deep level, if not in themselves, in someone they love deeply and who may be dying in front of them. So I was interested in the way some local things were going on in the Bronx where you have the best teaching hospital in New York, Columbia Presbyterian (which was associated with the university I was working with) and then some of the worst actual conditions in terms of infant mortality and other figures.

Then, when I was in new York in the eighties, the whole pressure to demonise illegal aliens was a little bit under the radar then compared to now when it's a full blown, blatantly explicit moral panic of the Right. Ironically, Bush is getting grief from his own party for being too soft on illegals and for, in their eyes, offering amnesty. That was another area I saw as important, where demos, marches and such actions could make a real difference.

GA: A point that seems to be being borne out by recent actions when we've seen massive demonstrations of millions in the American streets – of a size that only the anti-war in Iraq ones have exceeded in recent years.

SB: That's why it's so interesting, it's potentially very powerful. We've seen a direct alliance between immigrant communities and all kinds of academics. There seems to be a readiness for academics to take a stand there, where in other areas perhaps they would not have been. Part of that comes from the personal connections of having seen, certainly if you work in literacy classes or adult education – that's who your students are mainly. So the immigration debate has had some success in attracting support from academics.

In terms of a broad movement, climate change is now becoming much more acceptable as a mainstream rallying point. But I think it's still tending to break the connection between individual action and collectivisation, because a lot of the campaigns are about how each house can individually recycle and do all these other good things – it doesn't really take on global capitalism. However, health care almost inevitably does. That's where you can make the link clearly for people. What's also been interesting for me has been to work with those on the inside of the system: people who benefit from it in terms of being practitioners. I'm thinking how do I have some influence here, or is there any possibility of having influence on those who benefit so much more from it; financially or in terms of their ego and their power?

I do think if you take early Marx on alienation and how we can analyse that as not just shop-floor worker alienation but also, through Fromm, management alienation – that there is a way of reaching that group. If I work with a group like that, I start out talking about power and the times when you feel the use of power and when you feel decisions have been made that are out of your hands yet which very much effect how you live – how you realise who you are in your work and how the conditions of your work are set for you.

GA: Are we talking about administrators and management or about other health professionals such as doctors?

SB: Yes, administrators, but I'm also talking about others: I do work with surgeons. I've been brought in to do some work on 'critical thinking', to come in and reorganise residency training, the training of medical students, and to do professional development for surgeons, who you'd think would be the hardest audience to connect to. I use these experiences because it shows how health care is such a potential rallying point. If you have to look for hope in terms of a radical social transformation then I would say in the States it's around health care – it really is so screwed up, such that even those who benefit the most from it I think come to that awareness themselves.

You know there is a remarkable ahistorical aspect to America, a kind of making pop culture generalisations. It does seem like America forgets history more easily than others – at least white America forgets it more easily.

GA: I heard an eloquent exposition of the tendency in Ireland, when this activist said our culture and education is designed increasingly to encourage living in this perpetual present, therefore we don't learn the lessons of history and we don't envision possible alternatives either, that we need to realise the past and envision possible futures.

SB: When you talk about Eugene Debbs or the Wobblies or any historical event in American socialism, or the fact the Communist party had six million members, it's a matter of total astonishment to most people. It's not like America has always been a Klu Klux Klan, lynching, protectivist country. I think there have generally been some admirable democratic impulses. There's a great textbook I use in class called 'Lies my Teacher Told Me' by James Loewen, which does an analysis of ten high school textbooks that shows how history really has been written by the victors.

GA: When you have been involved with movements has it been as an educator.

SB: Yes – well sometimes it's just been as a rank-and-file member. My feeling always has been – and I come from a community development background, that's where I began – I was never going to be a university academic. I absolutely

promised myself I never would, because they were removed from real life. It only happened because I lost my job in the early eighties and needed to pay the bills and got offered a temporary study post in a university in Canada. I realised that in the States universities had an atmosphere – and explicitly a mission that was written for them to fulfil – that was much more congenial and expansive than universities in the UK.

The Land-Grant System, as it's called in the States, is an attempt to deliberately democratise higher education. It's more along the lines of thinking of the polytechnic, where there is one class of universities for arts and humanities which will take the opinion leaders, the civil servants, the military leaders, the future leaders of capital, and then there is the other, which would be the engineers and the scientists who will be working at the behest of capital and the military and so on. But those Land-Grant universities have a strong commitment to having as broad an access as possible which I think is admirable, irrespective of the curriculum – which is a whole other issue.

Whether I'm involved in movements as an educator would really depend. In terms of immigration work or the peace movement – which has really been massive since 2003 and the invasion, that really did galvanise a hell of a lot of people – then I'm working just as an activist in whichever ways are most helpful. It's easy to get involved with the immigrants' rights movement or the anti war movement for instance. I mean, there is no call to think am I gong in as an educator, you clearly go in as a private citizen, someone that is just enraged. But, sometimes you're going in to something like the creation of a group, like in the Minneapolis schools recently where I've been working with three women who want to set up a charter school, which is grounded in an afrocentric perspective on the world. The whole curriculum comes from what they regard as African-centred values and the classroom practices will be grounded in methods and techniques from those values. A charter school is a school which is funded publicly but has a great degree of control over its operations and it's a way of giving local parents' communities more control over the format of their children's education – at least that's the theory of it.

So with them, they have come to me and asked me just to give them whatever best advice that I could, and it's a whole area of work I'm really interested in for one reason or another. So I was able there to work in an explicit way both as an educator but also as a political strategist. Again that is where the distinction between educator and activist blurs or breaks down, because I don't think you can be a successful activist without a willingness to be critically reflective, to realise when your assumptions or analysis has led you into a wrong direction and to be more alert for that possibility next time. On the other hand, I don't think you can be an educator and do anything before bumping up against political realities within about 30 seconds, if what you're doing is in any way challenging to whatever norms are around at the time. So I'm working with them on how do you negotiate the school system, bureaucracy etc. because some of this is going to be very contentious, such as using material from Black nationalism, someone like Malcolm X – in the history of activism in the States Martin Luther King, now, is a beloved, paternal figure, whereas Malcolm X in a lot of whites' imaginations is still a rabble rouser who will rape our women and string up all whites. So if you're working to give them some control over that initiative that's where my expertise with the system (what I've learned, the instincts I've developed in having taken various initiatives through levels of bureaucracy) can be put at their disposal. They will come and say "What do you think we should do? What do we need to watch out for?" and so on. So I think there are some times when, in a situation like that I'm clearly being asked to work as an educator, and then there are other times where, following my community development background, you just kind of hang out and you pitch in wherever its seen as something needs to be done and you think you can do it, so you volunteer or you get told that's what you're doing. You don't come in and say I am this or I am that so here's how you use me, that's death. To me, you have no credibility, you may as well not bother. So I do think it depends on the contexts within which you find yourself.

GA: Is it not just another means of privatising education?

SB: Well this is the question. I think it's an example of oppressive tolerance in one way, but on the other hand it can give you a space to do some constructive work. It gives you a contested and a contradictory space. That's always the question, do you take it or do you say "No, this is so potentially compromised I don't want to get my hands dirty"? Seems to me like getting your hands dirty is what it's about.

GA: The latter examples suggest that your work in the state sector has a clear relevance to your work with the movements. Is the opposite true as well, is your work as an educator in the state sector affected by your work with social movements – and do you find there are serious conflicts and tensions there?

SB: Yes and that's basically the name of the game – conflict and tension. So there is no resolution, there is no way of working where you are not constantly in tension. If you choose to have anything to do with the system you're always in tension. This probably seems naïve, but I always think of the work within education as a way of (and I often frame it this way due to our dominant ideology) people being able to agree within the system, creating a little bit more democratic space. Now no-one can argue with that phrase: "creating a democratic space". If you use that to frame what you are doing, you can get quite far before any warning signs to people are registered. But when you create democratic space, which means that you as the teacher are not the sole source of authority, you're starting to question the power of certain individuals in the college or the university to make judgements, or accreditation bodies from outside to make judgements, about whether the learning is valuable or not. Then you come right up against the issue of power and who has the right to make these judgements, which brings you up against the issue of social structure. So just by the question of 'What grade am I going to get?', which every student has, it's a very quick analysis back to social structure. So what we're doing by me giving you this grade is actually the ideas and reality made flesh in this moment and you can link this back to the fact that we were accredited last year by this body, that this body has laid down these standards of accreditation, and ask who are the main members of the site team that visit, who are the paymasters of this particular body, how is the federal government involved – so you just trace it back and there is some real political education there. If you are going to democratise a space, to start opening things out for discussion and votes (or even not allowing votes on something) and start talking about democracy as not being the tyranny of the majority, and the students say "This is very difficult, we don't want to do any critical thinking, we just want you to tell us what we need to know and don't ask us to read 'communists' – like Marx", that's when I would say "No I'm not going to back off on that, because this is an incredibly rich, many would say the most accurate, world view that can

help you understand what you're experiencing in your lives. So we are not going to back off on that, but maybe you would like to spend a whole third of the course telling me all the reasons why this is a stupid thing to do or why Marx is so wrong."

So when I think of my practice within education I do think a lot of the democratic turmoils that I've experienced outside in social movements, and that really helps me understand what's going on in this context and helps me understand the nature of power and the importance of being explicit about my own power. One of the things that most pisses me off in community settings is when someone pretends that they don't have power and we are all in this as equals – and everybody knows that is not true.

GA: It goes back to the notion of mythical or false neutrality? Neutrality as neither possible or desirable.

SB: Yes, I think I'm much more comfortable being naked and fully transparent about my use of power these days. A lot of times I'll reach the stage when I say to the students: "I'm going to reserve a third of the curriculum to do what I think is crucial. You can have a third and you can essentially be in control of that and if you want to just totally push back against it that's fine, and the final third we're going to negotiate."

GA: Do you use your experience with social movements, your autobiographical material as illustration in your teaching?

SB: Yes, very much so, the autobiographies of myself and of my students, because most of my students are educators and in order to get them to be open, to give them ways of thinking about what they do, all I need to do is talk about power. Say, how the last staff meeting they were in was run and what decisions were made and by whom. How would they know who were the most important voices and what influence they would have over decisions and, when you try to get things to run a little bit more humanely or in a way that is more ethically responsible, what happens when you do that. What happens when you spoke up on behalf of someone being treated badly or unfairly by the organisation. As soon as you get into any of that territory one has a myriad of examples that you can bring out of what they regard as instances of power.

It's very easy for me to use experience in social movements and link it directly to what my own students are experiencing. Reasonably early on I may say to my students, "Well you know there are times in my work outside this particular classroom, I lie, I withhold information because I know that if I'm transparent about what I'm trying to achieve it's just playing into the hands of the enemy who would forestall me or shunt me off into a corner, so that part of being a responsible professional is developing a theory of ethical manipulation". At that point they sort of gasp, "Ethical manipulation, isn't manipulation by definition bad?" I draw a lot on the work of Ian Baptiste in America, he's a Tinidadian. He's developed, or is developing, a full pedagogy of ethical coercion and a theory of ethical manipulation broadly based on community work in Chicago. He has some case material concerning how, when you play the role of neutral facilitator attempting to create spaces for all voices to be heard, that often really creates space for the dominant agenda to reinforce itself and kills any real chance of openness and fairness. So I talk a lot about when lying or when the withholding of information is morally, absolutely the correct thing to do – and the students will all have done this, they will all have been in situations where, in order to make some change within their organisation that they felt was for the better, they had to outwit someone who was in charge of policy or finance, and to do that they had to play their cards close to their chest. So everyone's probably got some experience of it and it's very easy to then make the connections, drawing in various work from outside that is of relevance to their lives.

GA: The distinction is that values and objectives are not the same thing as tactics and methods, though we might wish them to reflect and prefigure or foreshadow our values and aims as much as is possible, for in the long run the ends may well justify the means. It's a realisation that we have to make decisions all the time, based on the evidence in front of us, in that particular context – that much to many people's disappointment there's no set of easy ready-made answers. It's not a simple 'yes' or 'no' but a matter of using our evolving judgement and discretion every time rather than blindly following rules – though we can through experience and critical reflection give ourselves better guidance?

SB: That's what our calculations need to be based on. For me, getting students to use terms like "the enemy" and to introduce them to Gramsci's notion of a war of position or Foucault's notion of specific intellectuals, and that organic intellectuals or specific intellectuals always come from specific contexts, specific movements. That there's a need to understand the internal dynamics of it in a war of position. These kinds of antagonistic ways of speaking are very uncomfortable for a lot of colleagues as well as students, because it just doesn't fit with the supposed democratic ethos that if we just talk out our differences long enough everyone can feel respect and everyone can feel included. A lot of places in America have centres for conflict resolution.

GA: It assumes conflict is seen as a pejorative term – that its viewed only as a negative?

SB: Absolutely – and I never felt that over here. The whole idea that conflict can always be resolved through dialogue, a very liberal, humanist idea, is very strong in the States, so you have to find a way quickly to challenge that. But for me it's never really difficult if you start with people's own experiences of trying to make change in their organisation, or trying to stop the worst excesses of the way a patient is treated, or their kids are treated, or the way their family is treated – that one of the easiest things is to bring lived experiences into the classroom as illustration.

The harder one is when negotiating skilfully within the broader context of an organisation to make some structural change. Thinking along structural lines, I would much prefer to see long-term grassroots programmes and ways of assessing what professionals can bring to put structural changes in place which are much harder to undo just at the whim of an individual or administrator's preference. So I always – given that I don't have that much energy or that many years left on the planet, and I think we all do this in making internal decisions – question as to where I'm going to put my effort. It's always an issue of 'What is the likelihood of this leading to long term structural change?' So working with the students towards a sphere of democratic possibility and for long term structural change can be really energising.

Will social movements in some way lead to establishing this, will movements within health rights lead to some structural change in the health system, will working within the peace movement?

: The peace movement experience has been incredibly disappointing. You had every city with hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets, and we still do regularly as on the 4th anniversary of going into Iraq. There's still massive street demos in Minneapolis, New York, San Francisco, but nothing happens with that. It doesn't lead to

structural change or even to a party organisation or anything like that.

GA: Is that partly because it's so broad in nature? For instance, it includes people whose stance is only against this war waged in this particular manner, 'the one with my son in it', and much that it's a good thing they are marching together this is a completely different analysis to many others' in the movement.

SB: Yes, and in the States linking it to capitalism is the hard part, and talking about it as imperialism. It seemed like people had really forgotten the notion of imperialism and American imperial expansion. The way this is often presented in America is in individualistic, psychological terms, even quite sophisticated ones. It's never really linked to markets or capitalism, and it seems that introducing a structuralised political economy analysis is the biggest educational challenge – and the reason it's really hard to form a party.

I think this is why the best way to focus on political economy in the States is more through health than through war, because health care is in massive crisis – that clearly always disproportionately hits the uninsured and under insured and the working class generally. But, it also hits a lot of middle-class Americans whose security of employment is much, much less than it used to be and many middle-class Americans are holding two or three jobs to meet a middle-class lifestyle. For instance, a lot of teachers in my kids' schools, their teaching salary is in no way enough to keep up and pay all their bills etc. and teaching contracts are notoriously bad – in fact it's just accepted that you will probably only have your first post for a year. I suppose statistically young teachers are probably pretty healthy, but mums, dads, uncles and aunts, grandparents and family might not be and thus they are intimately affected by the shambles that is the health system.

John Holst and I have talked a lot about where the chance is for the development of a revolutionary party or movement in the States and that, skilfully framed, health is where education can have a role. That's the kind of access point into a structuralised, collectivised world view where you can say, "Well we need to make decisions here that are clearly based in the interests of the many rather than the few." The health care system is where naked global, monopoly capitalism is so clearly evident that the link is easier to make than in many other areas, such as the war, or rights for immigrants, the need for a minimum wage, or much of the reform agenda.

GA: Do you think there is a lot more radical academics can offer social movements, and is that reciprocal? That neither is fulfilling the full educative potential that exists to forward the cause of social justice?

SB: Movements have a lot more to offer us than we have to offer them. But then I think the very nature of movement work is that you can't do it unless you're in the movement – you can't just come in. It's like a Blairite external consultant that someone hires to come in and say "Ok how can we mobilise more people in our community, how can we become more effective in achieving the results that we want, how can we get our message across." There must be constructive ways in which a movement can bring in radical intellectuals. I do think there can be a real issues of trust here though. I remember one day being at a Teamsters union meeting who were running a workshop in New York and had Paulo Freire there as a speaker. They were absolutely damning about Freire as they viewed him as knowing nothing about what it meant to negotiate with petrochemical or steel industries and their representatives. I've had evaluations about things I've done sometimes that have said, basically: "Why are you bringing in this guy, he's just a university teacher, he's done nothing and has got nothing of worth to tell us?" So I think there can be a genuine issue of trust and credibility. They need to know you're on our side and have something to offer us. That can require a long period of immersion and being willing to do anything that needs done that the movement wants you to. Which anyway you should – just anthropologically – as how on earth can you offer advice from the outside? That was always Myles Horton's point. It can take a long period of immersion or trust building for a movement to accept an educator seriously. It's necessary for the educator to realise and to see where they can perhaps make a contribution. For me, just trying to concretise it in my own experience, I can't know how best to build wide movement loyalty with the constituency that the movement involves because I don't know that constituency. But sometimes I can see that the pressure of time and tactics is pushing people immediately to work in one way, into thinking that we need to respond to this situation like this. We need to spend a few minutes stepping back, saying, "Let's just be clear why are we doing this, what assumptions are we operating under and what's the evidence we have for these assumptions", which is a very traditional critical thinking model that can pay real dividends.

GA: That tendency for movements to easily become overly reactive and insufficiently proactive can lead to a situation where you're following others' agendas.

OL: What was the fate of the practical ideas put forward in your 1997 essay 'Changing the Culture of Scholarship to the Culture of Teaching'?

SB: What I was saying in there was that my experience of community development has always taught me, my whole inclination is, to work from the ground upwards. You build a movement, you build energy, one neighbourhood, one house, one block at a time, and that's the way social movements develop. My whole orientation then leads me to say when I look at a hierarchical organisation such as a university just as a unit, there is also a role for those who have had some kind of 'consciousness change', to use a very hackneyed term. That they can model a way of working that, I hate to say it for its connotations, trickles down. There is a way that if senior public figures within an organisation behave, and draw attention to that behaviour, and say consistently "We're trying to model a different way of doing things around here", that is the other end of a movement to structural change. The grassroots thing becomes a lot easier if there is some consistency of modelling by those who are in senior positions. This is so utopian and unrealistic but I was playing around in that essay with the question of what would it look like if those up there were committed to the same kind of change.

Pretty much every place I know gives prizes for the best teacher of the year: students nominate them, other lecturers nominate them, they win the award, there's a presentation and they give a speech about their own philosophy of teaching. Those prizes usually go to the most charismatic teachers who use the most innovative participatory styles of teaching, and some of them are often very good. If you're trying to collectivise teaching then one of the things you would need to do is get rid of those prizes and merit pay, which is a very common feature in the States. It's a way of privatising and dividing the labour force and stopping any kind of development of collective interests .

This is very much in tandem with how things have happened in the UK: the control of the education agenda through, for instance, the Research Assessment Exercise. In the US school system we have the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation which, if we can look at it in terms of grudging respect for your enemy, is a beautiful example of the way that the Bush administration uses language in such a skilful Orwellian way – it's a thing of fascistic beauty. 'No Child Left Behind' basically means no child left untested. That is what it amounts to. There is testing, testing, testing, and of course all curriculum, rewards and budgets become geared towards that: which schools get the highest budget and thus the better teachers its now dependent on league tables based on testing. This is now moving more and more into higher education – research assessment is the same song with a different tune.

GA: From my experience of the system, this de-emphasises the importance of teaching. Without radically changing the system, we could press for a change in roles such that those who want to do research and publish but not teach do so, those who wish to do both can, and others are employed purely because they are good teachers – everyone, especially the students benefits?

SB: In the States there was a big initiative in the '80s and early '90s from the Carnegie Foundation on teaching to reframe 'the scholarship of teaching'. There was an attempt to develop a professional avenue or track where people just focused on the scholarship of teaching and became better and better teachers, introducing students to inherently difficult materials, and then there were others who wrote the books. Mind you, if you're trying to get someone into understanding critical theory you need a certain scholarship of practice to do this. Despite these ideas being so accurate and so helpful in explaining what everyone experiences, the way that they are written and talked about is often completely incomprehensible, highly alienating and makes those struggling to understand them feel like an idiot. So I think in terms of leftist scholarship we need a lot of good scholarly teachers, in the sense of teachers who know their students' worlds and who are good at making connections, knowing what are the entry points between students' experiences and inherently complex ideas.