Chapter 16
Coming to Terms with the Learning Society: Between Autobiography and Politics

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Introduction

This chapter is designated, more or less, as a follow-up to my "Rejoinder" to three commentaries in a 2008 symposium on my book *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* published in 2004.[1] Reading back on that "Rejoinder" it was intended in the first place to respond to the criticisms made in the commentaries, but I also saw it at the time as an opportunity to reformulate the thinking that went into the book both for the reader and for myself as a kind of a taking stock of where it had left me. Perhaps, in hindsight, I should have done more of the second than of the first. Indeed, this feeling came on me recently when I was looking at the "symposium" again. It was a feeling that stocktaking still needed to be done, a reassessment of the book, where it had left me, and where, if anywhere, I still needed to go – particularly with this notion of the learning society which I had first advocated in *maximalist* terms in an earlier book published nearly two decades earlier, in 1987, named *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*; that is, one which works with the assumption that lifelong education should be defined and organized in terms of the lifelong or vertical (in terms of individual) and lifewide or horizontal (in terms of social) organization of learning.[2] In the maximalist view, the learning society is a society

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[1] See Wain Kenneth (2008) 'Rejoinder to Responses to an invitation to comment on the book: Wain, K, The Learning Society in a Postmodern World, by David Aspin, Padraig Hogan and Richard Bagnall', in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 40, Issue 4, August, pp. 557–581.

[2] A good definition of the maximalist conception of the learning society is the following: The learning society is one that is exceedingly self-conscious about education in its total sense; that is, conscious of the educational relevance and potential of its own institutions and of the general social environment that is its way of life, and is determined to maximize its resources in these respects, to the maximum. (Wain 1987, pp. 202–203).

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committed to maximizing learning opportunities for its members by mobilizing its resources, human and material, for the purpose. The maximalist view supported the democratization of the idea that education should be a lifelong process (which had a long earlier history but elitist associations) and that it should be regarded as an individual right. In the same book, I had argued that educational theory must focus on the notion of a learning society, with schooling reconceptualized as an element of such a society. This promoted me to suggest an approach to philosophy of education that shifts away from its traditional concern as a discipline occupied with schooling and teachers toward issues relating to the learning society and educators in general – more generally theorizing the learning society politically as a society that promotes policies and practices of lifelong learning.

Philosophy of Lifelong Education also marked my first use of Richard Rorty's work, which was also to be a central influence on *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World*. The Rorty texts involved were *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980) and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982). What struck me with Rorty, especially at that time, was his criticism of the representation of philosophy as a discipline. Indeed, in both the books he had wanted to stop speaking about disciplinary matrices in general and to speak of cultures evolving in open conversation instead, with philosophy conceived as a strand of a certain sort (the sort that constitutes its history) that has grown out of our Western conversation with its beginnings traceable not to Plato, as one tends to do if one regards it as a discipline, but to the pre-Socratics. This idea of a conversational politics is the aspect of his thinking that I used in *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*.[3] Reading *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* also introduced me to the distinction Rorty made in the book between "normal" and "abnormal" discourse, which became important for me, on the other hand, in writing *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* later, where (corresponding with Kuhn's distinction between normal and revolutionary science) the former is conventionally theoretical, systematic, or constructive, and the latter therapeutic and deconstructive, or poetic. Rorty's assumption, which I share, is that we require *both* kinds of discourses for different purposes or to put to different uses – indeed that the former is necessary for the latter and the latter parasitic on the former, in the sense that a discourse is only abnormal relative to the normal and in the way it reacts to the normal. In subversive hands, abnormal discourse challenges with its strangeness, untimeliness, and unfittingness, unsettling the normal discourse being outrageous and even offensive in its more radical forms. In the sense that it constitutes itself as a challenge to the normal, the abnormal is always political, and its purpose, in this sense, is to destabilize the normal – this is the game of power that it plays.

This is Foucault's understanding of the abnormal discourse of genealogy as he works it, too. But while Rorty supports what represents itself as politically normal in the West, its liberal and democratic institutions, Foucault counsels a politics of

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[3] Reading Rorty's and Gadamer's politics of conversation, I was able to describe the learning society as an ongoing project created through the open-ended conversation of all the partners and stakeholders; educators (in the broadest sense), learners, policy makers, providers, and so on, more or less, also, in Dewey's fashion.

suspicion toward it instead. Indeed, he counsels suspicion of whatever presents itself or is presented to us as the norm, or normal, and describes his genealogies as a problematizing of normality and normalization.[4] In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* ([1989]) Rorty tries to prevent this normal-abnormal formulation from being turned into a dichotomizing formula by reading the emerging discourse of his society poetically, as a utopian discourse, the discourse of an emerging liberal utopia, that is, by reading the abnormal into the normal. In this way, his work becomes coextensive or conversational with a project (a utopia) named America that he identifies as already in the making, articulated in the writings of Whitman and Dewey. It is understood that the utopia Rorty has in mind is not one that is constructed on a blueprint, or even on foundations of some sort (a constitution for instance) – indeed, it is not one that is constructed or theorized at all but grows in the conversation of generations to which the philosopher gives voice. The scope of Rorty's utopianism is therapeutic, in a Wittgensteinian way, rather than constructive. The project is to help his fellow-countrymen break with the picture that currently holds them captive, the self-image they have constituted for themselves, and which has continued to remain largely metaphysical, by exposing it to ironist readings. In this way, the readings are part of the project itself, which he regards as a project of secularization, secularization (the de-divinization of culture) being how he defines progress in its broadest sense.

Rorty believed that the West has its politics fundamentally right. He thus often wrote about Foucault as though he were the arch enemy – Foucault was, he thought, too subversive, too Nietzschean, too distrustful of the liberal institutions of the West, and too negative to serve the American project – could it be different for the "European project" if, indeed, the expression stands for anything more than a slogan, as those with deep anti-federalist sentiments (who dismiss the notion of a European federation of states) would contend?[5] But then, it could be claimed that the expression "American project" is a slogan also, except that there is legally and constitutionally a federation of states that goes by the name of America and this is not the case with Europe today.[6] What is the criticism that something is merely a slogan, meant to imply? Probably, that there is nothing tangibly existent that it stands for, nothing beyond the words it uses. But this criticism assumes a narrow description of the tangible identifying it with such things as legal structures and institutions. A slogan *does*, however, have a certain tangibility even if it does not have these corresponding structures and institutions; the fact that it is used by people and falls within a discourse renders it tangible. A slogan is successful and has power if it resonates with the imagination or strikes a chord; its

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[4] In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes "the proper task of a history of thought, as against a history of behaviors or representations," as being "to define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" (p. 10). The question he tried to respond to in the book was "how, why, and in what form was sexuality constituted as a moral domain" (p. 10).

[5] See especially *Achieving our Country* ([1998]).

[6] The relevance of my reference to the "European project" will appear clearer subsequently when I refer to and discuss the evolution of the lifelong learning discourse within the European Union.

power is that it spurs or incites to action. This was the purpose to which the expression "learning society" was put when it was "merely" a slogan introduced into the language of lifelong education by the Faure report (1972) where it was projected as a utopian aspiration. And this is how Rorty understands the American project too – as an aspiration or group of aspirations that create programs of reform which produce a liberal utopia inspired by a politics of social democracy.

Rorty criticizes Foucault on the grounds that his politics of suspicion are entirely negative, that his Nietzschean influences render him suspicious of slogans, projects, and utopias – liberal ones in particular – and that his politics make for cynicism and despair. A Foucaultian approach to the learning society regards it *not as an aspiration but as a fact*; that is, his learning society does not await fulfillment it exists at the moment – it is what our societies *are*. This is the important difference he brings to the language of the learning society. A Foucaultian approach regards *every* society as a learning society and wants to ask how that society works politically by scrutinizing its institutions through the lens of power and the forms it takes. Hence, it does not deal either with slogans or with projects except insofar that a project already exists in the tangible form of institutions and practices. The outcome of Foucault's own genealogical scrutiny of the modern Western state is well known and described in his reflections about the disciplined society and his vision of modern Western societies as disciplinary archipelagos constituted by economies of power that are supported by the various institutions that have created the modern state in *Discipline and Punish* (1991) in particular. Foucault's genealogies have in common with utopian narratives that their power of persuasion lies not with their identification of what they describe with the truth but with their suggestiveness, their power to resonate with the imagination of the reader, to provoke the reader into a feeling of familiarity – a feeling that there is *something*, some *truth*, in these narratives, in what they say, and that truth renders them disquieting. In short, the power of resonance is not simply its appeal to the imagination but the power of truth it must have if it is to resonate, and if it fails to resonate it is precisely the power of truth that it lacks. And this is the case with slogans also.

I first encountered the notion of lifelong education in the late 1970s when, having just joined the academic staff of the new education faculty of the University of Malta, I was asked by my then faculty dean (who was not a philosopher) to do a course for student-teachers on the subject in its new bachelor's teacher education course after advice to that effect from a UNESCO expert. I was naturally referred to the UNESCO literature, most particularly to the Faure Report (1972) but to other reports also for a start to my research, and immediately starting seeking out other literature in the subject of a theoretical nature. This quickly led me to the work of people such as Lengrand, Dave, Suchodoldski, Cropley, and Ettore Gelpi, an Italian founder of the Radical Party in his country, with whom I became friends some years later in 1984 when we together organized a conference on lifelong education in Malta. Gelpi, the then head of the lifelong education unit at UNESCO, Paris, was also one of the keynote speakers at the conference.[7] The

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[7] The proceedings of the conference were later published as *Lifelong Education and Participation* (Kenneth Wain editor) in 1985.

others were adult educators all, his acquaintances and friends, and chosen because they shared a common experience; they had all played a major role in starting or reviving adult education in their countries that had emerged from a long period of dictatorship or colonialism in the Mediterranean region – a Portuguese, a Spaniard (Catalan to be more precise), a Greek, an Algerian, and a Yugoslav. The meeting was a classical example of the political agenda with which these writers and educators tied lifelong education, and an explanation of the importance given to adult education in particular in the literature. Dictatorships want to keep their adults dependent on children, hence their aversion toward adult learning. Schools are less problematic for them being conservative institutions by nature, and so is the teaching profession. Mass schooling has virtually monopolized educational resources in every sense in the modern world. In the popular mind, education still means childhood and schooling, that is, dependence. Adult education, on the other hand, is the territory where mostly nonprofessional educators operate and have the freedom to experiment, where the exciting and empowering innovations in learning are happening in the free world. So the future of social and political change lay with these educators not with school teachers – or at least this is what people like Gelpi and his friends at the conference were saying.

As a professional teacher myself with a longish career in primary and secondary schools now working with student-teachers who would teach in a school setting, never having had any experience in educating adults, and with virtually no knowledge of what was happening in adult education in Malta, the exchange intrigued and challenged me. I was convinced by the pragmatic argument for lifelong learning from the start, so I had no problems there – it seemed to me obvious (and still does) that in a fast-changing world like ours, people's learning needs cannot be satisfied with a period of schooling restricted to youth and childhood; it must go into adulthood. I agreed that the scope of adult learning needs to be reconsidered in all the dimensions in which living in such a world presents challenges for individuals and their societies, as Paul Lengrand (1975) had argued. It also seemed obvious to me that reconsidering the role of adult learning in our societies could not occur separately from reconsidering the role of schooling, indeed, that the two must be reconsidered together. The operational, or strategic, notion that appeared to capture this idea for me was the notion of a "learning society," defined strategically somewhere (I forget where, perhaps Ivan Illich but I may be wrong), as a "society mobilized for learning," which on the maximalist principle would incorporate and synchronize both. How a society could be mobilized or, more accurately, how it could mobilize itself for learning in a "lifewide" manner, that is, over the whole spectrum of institutions and activities that constitute it, and how it could do so with an agenda of empowerment (which was the question that distinguished the discourse of lifelong *education* from the more generalized one of lifelong *learning*) was the focus of this Mediterranean meeting we held in Malta. The distinction announced by the words "more accurately" in the preceding sentence is evidently politically vital, because "could be mobilized" implies the activity of an external agency, the state in particular, mobilizing the society according to its agenda – and that state could well be a dictatorship; indeed, dictatorships have shown themselves to be particularly good at

using the state apparatus to mobilize their populations for learning, with the dictator, always a charismatic figure, represented as the great educator.

Apart from the Faure Report (1972) and the theoretical literature of the writers, published mainly by UNESCO, the other resource I would logically have turned to when I was designing my lifelong education course (which, as a matter of fact, was the only one, Gelpi told me, he had encountered anywhere in the world), as a philosopher wanting to give it a philosopher's orientation, was contemporary philosophy of education. But I knew that save for John Dewey who was clearly identifiable, and was already identified, as a precursor of lifelong education, the field was practically barren, at least where Anglophone philosophers were concerned. There were a couple of works on adult education that, I felt, could be helpful, like Paterson's (1979) exploring the ethical and political issues of adult education, and, a little later, an article by Kenneth Lawson (1982) in the newly published *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, the only one interrogating the concept of lifelong education philosophically, but nothing much besides that I could lay my hands on.[8] The reason was historical and ideological; the philosophy of education as it had grown as a discipline since the 1950s discounted any interest in adult education. This was clear from the lack of interest in the subject in the journals and books it produced. In those early days it was hitched to two objects – philosophically to an analytic paradigm which, in its harshest form, tended toward positivism, and which prohibited the consideration of substantive issues like the political ones that concerned the lifelong education writers; and strategically to the business of schools, classrooms, curricula, and so on – all taken aboard as concepts to be amply analyzed by philosophers for the understanding of teachers, whose responsibility then was to use this understanding in their practice. Much had changed by the 1980s, the time I wrote *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*. By then, analytic philosophy of education was challenged on several counts, both philosophical and in terms of its usefulness for teachers. In short, it was losing its status as *the* paradigm for the discipline. And the newer analytic philosophers had changed their attitude toward political detachment considerably, openly acknowledging their liberal allegiances and inverting the relationship between theory and practice by moving from practical issues and topics (meaning those teachers meet with in the classroom) to the theory rather than the other way around, thus hoping to improve the relevance of their work for teachers, who continued to be their clients.

Indeed, one thing that had not changed in philosophy of education in the 1980s, and still has not changed, was its general lack of interest in adult education; the discourse one meets with in its books and journals remained and still remains faithful to the agenda of schooling and teachers' issues which it received from the hands of its pioneers. The other thing that had not, and has not, changed was the nearly complete lack of interest of philosophers in the literature on lifelong education or, indeed, in the concept itself – perhaps partly because that literature was mainly European, and partly because lifelong education was, and still is, identified as

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[8] I used Paterson's book more extensively than in Philosophy of Lifelong Education, in an article published later (1992) "Making a Case for Adult Educational Rights."

simply another name for adult education.[9] I wrote my 1987 book *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*, based on my doctoral thesis supervised by John White (one of the leading analytic philosophers in London), which I submitted to the University of London in 1984, with the naïve hope of changing this situation; of exciting this interest and introducing it into the philosophical literature, which, I thought, was all that was needed, given the obvious force of the pragmatic argument for lifelong education, to persuade philosophers of its importance. Once the argument for lifelong education and for refocusing theory on the learning society is conceded, I thought, as it must be, the philosophy of education's focus on schooling and the concerns of teachers would become immediately problematic. I thought that there was enough of a case for the argument to persuade hands down. What would follow I thought, at the least, would be a fundamental problematizing of the institution of mass schooling from the angle of the learning society. This problematizing is what I took the literature on lifelong education to be about in the mid-1980s, following on the Faure Report and, more or less, on what Illich was doing at the time, but less radically – not necessarily to abolish it. It was what lay at the heart of my course on lifelong education as an educator of student teachers. From my very first encounter with the lifelong education literature, I was convinced of the need to reassess the scope and value of mass schooling for our times, its impact on the politics of teaching and the curriculum, within the broader reality of the politics of the learning society. Though, as Illich (1978) showed, it is always possible to theorize a learning society where there are no schools or formal learning institutions at all. This is where the question how to define the learning society itself, as the new focus of one's theorizing about education, as a political and pedagogical reality, comes in.

As I have explained elsewhere, the project that suggested itself immediately to me as the follow-up for *Philosophy of Lifelong Education* was to theorize the learning society politically as a project with a liberal social democratic normative core and an operational belt constituted by the operational terms created by the lifelong education literature.[10] I remarked in my "Rejoinder" in the symposium referred to in the beginning of this chapter that this could still be a worthwhile undertaking for theorists and policymakers with a social democratic agenda interested in the politics of implementation or governance but, on reflection, for reasons I shall give toward the end of the chapter (not the least the changed profile of social democracy since the 1990s), perhaps it could not. As I started to research my new book, however, the circumstances surrounding the discourse of lifelong education began to change and so did my own outlook as a philosopher, particularly as I found myself being taken more and more deeply into the thinking of Rorty and Foucault. Rorty, as I remarked earlier, had already featured briefly in my thinking when I wrote *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*. I was first attracted to him by his self-description as a Deweyan since Dewey had been an important influence on me; apart from pre-empting the *lifelong education literature* in a number of ways, he had contributed strongly to my

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[9] For an extended discussion of the relation between lifelong learning and philosophy the reader is referred to my article "Lifelong Learning and Philosophy" (2009).

[10] In *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* (2004) for instance.

liberation as a philosopher from my early empiricist philosophical education. I had found his writing much more congenial to me than the analytic philosophy that was about at the time I started taking an interest in philosophy of education in the late 1970s. Later I could also see him, as I remarked in passing earlier, as a predecessor to the lifelong education movement.[11] I was not convinced, on reading him, that Rorty was Deweyan in his thoughts about education, but I was convinced by his attack in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980) on the foundationalist philosophical culture that marked modernity, on the idea that epistemology validates or underwrites the work of the social sciences and provides philosophy with its remit. And I was strongly attracted by his case for a hermeneutic counterculture which replaces truth with understanding as the goal of all inquiry and, as I said earlier, views philosophy as a strand in the conversation that constitutes our Western culture (a way of looking at things that harmonizes with pragmatism) rather than as a legitimizing agent.[12] Rorty's distinction between "normal" and "abnormal" discourse and his account of philosophy in the latter form as having a therapeutic function was also mentioned in the same book. It was not, however, as I remarked above, these elements of his writing but his description of a conversational philosophical culture that attracted my attention then and that I used in *Philosophy of Lifelong Education* as a strategic tool that would energize the politics of the learning society. The situation was reversed when I eventually wrote *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World*, where the distinction provoked the question Rorty had raised in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which I had not seen in the earlier book, and which now became fundamental for me; do I really want to write a *theory* of a learning society? Where Rorty himself was concerned, this was a question that he had returned to more forcefully in 1989 in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, where he drew the outlines of a liberal utopia *without doing theory*, that is, poetically.

At about this time when I was considering this matter, the fortunes of lifelong education as the concept guiding UNESCO's initiatives in education, and of the theoretical literature that had articulated it politically and pedagogically, had declined to the extent that they had practically disappeared from sight. I responded to this situation which developed toward the end of the 1980s by dropping my B.Ed. course on the subject and turning my philosophical interests elsewhere. Influenced to some extent by Rorty in this respect, I decided to correct the bias of my philosophical education further by reading the contemporary Continental philosophy being called "postmodernist." Other philosophers, beside who attracted my interest, were Alasdair MacIntyre and Jurgen Habemas. I had read MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) long before at the beginning of the 1980s when I was still working on my doctoral thesis, but only out of general interest because a fuss was being made about it at the time. When John White, sensing that I would be interested, alerted me in 1985 (at the time I was well advanced in writing *Philosophy of Lifelong Education*) that MacIntyre was going to be in London to do a public lecture on the "educated

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[11] See my article "Lifelong Education: A Deweyan Challenge" (1984).

[12] See my articles "Strong Poets and Utopia: Rorty's Liberalism, Rorty and Utopia" (1993) and "Richard Rorty, Education and Politics" (1995a).

public" in a series of three such lectures dedicated to R.S. Peters, I was naturally intrigued. It immediately seemed to me (as it must have seemed to White) that there must be some connection between MacIntyre's subject and the learning society (the learning society as an educated public?). The upshot was that I went to the London lecture, attended a separate invited session on his paper after at the Institute, and obtained a copy of the paper. I knew, however, that it was too late to do much about it in my book at the present stage of writing. The "educated public" had to wait for later, for the book to follow perhaps. Meanwhile, my interest in the notion and its confirmed relation with the learning society generated by MacIntyre's paper led me to read Habermas who had also theorized an educated public of a very different kind and who had worked extensively on the public sphere. Papers on these competing ideas of the educated public (1994) and on MacIntyre's account of the educated public (1995) followed, and on Foucault (1996) who interested me differently by suggesting, in *Discipline and Punish* (1991), a very different perspective on the learning society. Far from being interested in education or sustaining educated publics of our modern Western societies, Foucault suggested, could be regarded as learning societies obsessed with disciplinary techniques related to policing technologies and experimented in "institutions of confinement," prisons evidently but also schools and other establishments, and disseminated throughout the societies.

Foucault suggested what Gelpi had already suggested with respect to the learning society, that one could read modern Western societies as being already at work as learning societies, in Foucault's case societies of the disciplinary kind described in *Discipline and Punish*. What was especially novel with Foucault's account, from my perspective, was that he described the learning society in terms of economies of power that are hidden to the eye, and whose operations his genealogical sociological narratives undertook to unmask. These narratives resonated with my intuition of things. Though fictional, in the sense of not claiming the truth for what they said, and poetic in the sense of being unconventional or abnormal, they struck a chord of truth, or at least credibility and could not be dismissed as *just* fiction. Foucault shared Rorty's view that there are two ways to do politics, coinciding very roughly with the latter's distinction of the normal and abnormal. Doing normal politics means entering the conventional discourse of the politics of governance which, in Western terms, means the conversational (where the aim is consensus) or confrontational (where it turns agonistic), as the case may be, discourse of democracy from the competing political angles of Left and Right ideologies. The work of a philosopher here would be to subject the discourse to critique or to elaborate and justify its theories of justice, freedom, civil rights, democracy, and so on, according to the political angle one takes into it. My original follow-up project to *Philosophy of Lifelong Education* would have been of this kind, its angle would have been, as I remarked earlier, Left or social democrat. Or doing politics from the perspective of the governed anxious to resist whatever strategies of dominance there could lurk behind that discourse by problematizing or deconstructing it, for instance, by asking with Foucault how power works within specific institutions of the modern state that form the political framework of the learning society. Perhaps, following his work, investigating how we, its modern members, are made subjects to and by that power,

how it totalizes us into the normality we are as members of the collectives we belong to, and individualizes us into the kinds of individuals that we are by the freedoms it fashions us into – the two roles of the learning society Foucault describes as politics of governance.

The first half of the 1990s witnessed a resurgent interest in lifelong learning. It came with a changed political and economic climate in Europe following on the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 and of communism in general as a politico-economic system and an ideology through the continent, and on the end of the cold war. The old discourse of lifelong learning (of lifelong education in the language of UNESCO and of "recurrent education" in that of the OECD), which was there and available for use, was appropriated by an emerging political agenda supported by a broad alliance of employers, politicians, and policymakers. It also made the same pragmatic argument for lifelong learning as had been made before. Like the Faure Report of two decades earlier, it presented itself dramatically as a "rallying call" (which one could call a slogan) addressed to all interested in the business of learning, to schools and teachers especially, but also to industry and business, to the state and its policymakers, to get their act together in the field of learning at all levels and ages, otherwise Europe risked losing its place among the competitive economies of the world. It took the European Union (EU) little time to endorse and take up this call and make it its own – lifelong learning was no longer a myth or a mere slogan, it was now the official policy of an organization of states with a very powerful bureaucracy, the European Commission – a very different agency from UNESCO. One recalls that one of the complaints made about the expression "lifelong education" at the time of its popularity in the 1970s and 1980s was its ambiguity as it evolved rather chaotically in the literature, but UNESCO, being mainly a debating club, could live with that. "Lifelong learning" was ambiguous also as it had been variously interpreted as lifelong education, recurrent education, continuing education, permanent education, and so on – notions with different strategic implications. Bureaucracies, however, are not comfortable with ambiguities; one universal term was needed, lifelong learning, the rest, lifelong education included, were dropped from the vocabulary which the bureaucracy of the European Commission standardized in a memorandum to its member states in 2000, also identifying "key messages" for policy in the name of lifelong learning.

All this became the subject of the narrative with which I opened the first two chapters of my book *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* (2004) (updating and improving the first chapter of *Philosophy of Lifelong Education* which had stopped with the earlier history of lifelong education) when I began writing it. Matters were obviously very different now, in the mid-1990s, from how they were when I finished *Philosophy of Lifelong Education* a decade earlier. Then, a case had to be made for lifelong education with governments, policymakers, educators, and, indeed, with the society at large, from the point of view of the objective of creating a learning society. There had also been work to be done to bring the literature together into a coherent theory which would render it approachable to these agencies and agents in different relevant ways for different purposes, strategic and pedagogical, and this was also the objective of that book. In the late 1990s, lifelong learning

did not need converts, to the contrary it named an established project on a continental scale, its policies driven by an effective bureaucracy, to the extent that there was a certain hegemonic taken-for-grantedness about its politics and its discourse. So that, my interest in it renewed, I returned to my project of writing a follow-up book on the learning society in very different circumstances and with a very different approach from that in the mid-1980s. Different also, as I remarked earlier, was the frame of mind with which I returned to it. Where my earlier attitude toward the discourse and politics of lifelong education was positive in the sense that I identified with it and wanted to join it in conversation with my follow-up book, I was now unhappy with this turn of events – with the new political discourse of lifelong learning. So I was certainly going to write a very different sort of book from that originally planned. Not a book that would enter into the mainstream of this discourse, the new normal discourse of lifelong learning, but one that would unsettle it.

That book, *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World*, was written over a period of about 6 years. The term "learning society" was still part of the discourse of lifelong learning in the EU documents and reports early on; even the idea of a European learning society was mooted! Or at least it was inserted into the vocabulary! But the social and political interest in the learning society that had characterized the agenda of the earlier debate was absent. The debate about the kind of the democracy it could be, the role the state would play, financial and political, in sustaining it, its learning culture, the environment it could produce for the individual and collective growth (in Dewey's sense of the word), the kind of mobilization of learning resources and politics of collaboration it would promote, how it could define itself as socially just, and so on, questions which were on my original agenda for writing my follow-up book. The old discourse of self-directed learning in the lifelong education literature was taken from the context of a politics of collective supportive mutual responsibility implied by the notion of a learning democracy to be reinterpreted in a different way in terms of the individual's complete personal responsibility for her or his learning. As the first decade of the new century advanced, the term learning society disappeared from the reports and policy documents, where there was already no reference to education either. Lifelong learning was now all about acquiring key vocational and technological skills and measurable competences related to employability and the construction of a knowledge society based on constant innovation that would be the machine for Europe's economic competitiveness in the global economy.

As the book was being written, I came to see lifelong learning minus any interest in the notion of a learning society (i.e., minus any interest in the politics of equality, support, cooperation, inclusion, democratic empowerment, and so on, that the notion inspired), and endorsing a performativist technological agenda (i.e., one minus any interest in education) not as a positive thing as I had seen lifelong education earlier, but as a disturbing development, a problem, a project I wanted to resist rather than endorse or legitimize – not, however, by countering it with a competing project with a social democrat master narrative as I had originally intended – my "postmodernist" readings had cured me of that ambition. *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* served me as a clearing ground for ideas and uncertainties that

were circling around in my head at the time of writing engendered by all these circumstances I have been describing. In essence, I needed to sort out a number of issues in my mind that were provoked by the current discourse of lifelong learning and by the new directions my thinking had taken with my encounter with "postmodern" thinking, and I looked to the four philosophers I mentioned earlier, Rorty, MacIntyre, Foucault, and Habermas, each with his own very different take on modernity and its future as a project than the others – my view being that what was at stake at this stage of the game was the future of the modern notion of education as the cultivation of a free (meaning autonomous in some one of its understandings) mind in a postmodern performativist world. One task was to describe this world, that is, of our changing contemporary societies, as learning societies. The effect of the phenomenon of accelerating change created by a rapidly growing technological environment on people's lives, with the instability it brought with it, which first instigated the call for lifelong education for all in the 1960s, continues to be their defining feature. If anything, the rate of change has been exacerbated in the interval, resulting in learning societies which social theorists define as "risk" societies. In any case, this feature of change is certainly a key feature of the transition from a modern to a postmodern world with its familiar social, economic, and political features. The political trigger for the transition, the collapse of communism in Europe in 1989, was also what triggered this renewed interest in lifelong learning which, without wishing to be too simplistic, I would explain in terms of the fast-changing economic and political climate that followed it. The new discourse of lifelong learning evolved as part of, and was made necessary by, the newly emerging postmodern reality at the heart of which, I agree with Lyotard (1999), beats this culture of performativity, of measuring and valuing everything in terms of efficient and effective outcomes.

In my new book I tried to show where the notion of the learning society was coming from and how it featured in the lifelong learning literature of the EU of the 1990s until, after some timid gestures toward the issues of democratic participation and social cohesion, it was withdrawn in the early years of the twenty-first century. To continue my sociology of the postmodern learning society that the Western society has become, I turned to Foucault's account of the disciplined society and to Jean Baudrillard's account of a media-saturated information society. In the case of the latter, to his account of the seductive effect of modern technology and, more especially, media technology, on the masses which, as he says, respond to this seduction with their complicity, their fascinated silence. Is our postmodern learning society today disciplined or seduced, or both at once, the first by the institutions of the state, the second by the media? I think both. What are the chances for reviving the notion of an educated public in this environment? Baudrillard's account also, like Foucault's (with which I do not see it as being in contradiction), resonates with my intuitions, rings with the truth. Before this line of thinking was pursued, I examined the respective features of Habermas's and MacIntyre's competing publics to represent what was at stake in each better. I hope I did enough to show my preference for Habermas's liberal public which is close to Dewey's and which could quite easily have been a central feature of the theorized learning society that was my original project, were

that still my interest. But, again, was it *my* interest? This, to repeat, was a fundamental question that faced me in writing the book.

Two other things, beside my reading of Foucault and Baudrillard, got into the way of replying in the affirmative and sticking to that project. One, this encounter with "postmodernist" thought I have been referring to, which refers (it must be explained in the light of the often ambiguous use of the term) to something different from "postmodern" as used by social theorists to describe the *character* of the contemporary world as one that exacerbates the features of risk, fast change, technology, globalization, and so on, that already characterized the modern world. Lyotard (1979) identifies an *attitude* of disillusionment people living in the postmodern world experience with respect to the master narratives that, to the contrary, held the modern world captive – those that drove the Enlightenment or modernist project, amongst which the narrative that speaks the language of the educated public and conceives of education as the possession of a rationally autonomous outlook achieved by participating in the public. Sharing Rorty's feeling that the "postmodernists" were philosophically right and insightful to support this attitude of suspicion toward master narratives (whether they were "politically silly" also, as he also held, is another matter – I think not), I was forced to rethink my interest in theorizing a learning society with a master narrative of social democracy at its heart and sustained by an educated public and, effectively, to abandon it. The "postmodernist" rejection of the idea of an autonomous subject, as a rational center of consciousness, also demanded a new understanding of "education" – if one wanted to continue to operate with the word. I shall return to this point at the end of this chapter.

The other problem I encountered was with the way social democracy itself was being redefined, with the "new," "Third Way" version of its politics that came to life and, in many countries, power, in the 1990s at the expense of its socialist roots. Articulated in the writings of such as Anthony Giddens (1998a, b) Third Way politics responded to the "crisis" of the European Left following on the events of the late 1980s that brought the collapse of Communism in Europe, by steering away from the politics of "ideological" confrontation, toward a political middle ground "beyond left and right," to use the title of another of Gidden's (1998a, b) books. And therefore toward a postmodern scenario or political landscape without master narratives – a move which coincided perfectly with the currently evolving politics of lifelong learning in the late 1990s, because of this distancing from "ideology" – this character of being beyond politics is precisely how a performativist culture which identifies itself with technological values presents itself. In the thinking of the new social democracy individual lifelong learning is sustained not by a learning society inspired by solidarity between learners but by a learning account in a learning bank financed jointly by the individual, the employer, and the state. In short, the politics of identifying lifelong learning as a project of personal responsibility that lay at the heart of the Third Way social democracy was hostile to the politics of collective responsibility that underpinned the old ideal learning society where individual lifelong learning projects are sustained by a culture of mutual support and solidarity, by an agenda of collective empowerment, and by the understanding that learning be regarded as a lifelong right. "No rights without responsibility" was the slogan (or at least one of

them) of the new Third Way social democracy. What kind of ice could theorizing a learning social democracy cut in such circumstances where its language was so much out of favor and where the prevalent language was performativist and economic?

In sum, the writing of *The Learning Society in a Postmodern World* left me with serious philosophical and political problems with my original idea of theorizing a learning society with social democratic political affiliations. And this left me, in turn, with the question where I wanted to go, if anywhere, with the idea of a learning society? I see little if any possibility that the concept will make any comeback soon in an EU policy landscape occupied politically by employers and governments now obsessed mainly with the problems of economic survival and revival, and by bureaucrats who have every interest to sustain a performativist discourse of lifelong learning which, because it seems to be "nonideological," enjoys a broad political consensus. Foucault and Baudrillard tell us why we should remain interested in it, nonetheless. Not to theorize it in the old utopian way of the 1970s but, as Gelpi suggested, as an analytical tool to bring to bear on our societies; to remind them that no matter that the policymakers have dropped the concept from their language we shall continue to regard them as learning societies, and to concern ourselves with their social and political quality. This is not, however, the end of the story. Foucault and Baudrillard not only suggest *how* we can be made subject, or subjectivized, by the learning society we inhabit through its politics of learning, they suggest that we must be able to go the step further of working on ourselves, redefining or reinventing ourselves anew all the time, in the face of its oppressive or dangerous features, and I am calling that activity of working on oneself lifelong *education*.

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