

Recensioni

Borinski, F. (2014). *The German Volkshochschule, an Experiment in Democratic Adult Education under the Weimar Republic*, (Ed.) by Friedenthal-Haase, M., Bad Heilbrunn, Germany: Publisher Julius Klinkhardt, Book Series: *Beiträge zur internationalen, interkulturellen und historischen Erwachsenenbildung* (Eds.) Meilhammer E., Matthes, E. , 285 pp. Euro 18, 90 (ca. \$ 25) (paperback)

Reviewed by Monica Fedeli, University of Padova, Italy

This book is a remarkable contribution to the field of international and intercultural adult education – a rich source of possible inspirations for the theory as well as for the practice in that field. It comprises the edited version of a manuscript written in the years 1944 to 1945, published here for the first time. The author, Fritz Borinski (1903-1988), was a German educational thinker of Jewish origin, a pioneer in the field of adult education in Germany, and most influential in the reconstruction of German adult education after 1945, being a professor of education from 1956 to 1970 at the Free University of Berlin (which in its entirety was substantially supported by American grants). Within the field of education Borinski specialized in political education and adult education. He became well known also for his book of 1954 on the education of democratic citizens (*Der Weg zum Mitbürger – “Educating democratic Citizens in Adulthood”*). The reviewer would like to mention that that book was translated into Italian, immediately got a second edition and was an inspiration for the Italian discussion on citizenship education (*Educazione del cittadino*, Roma: A. Armando 1961, 2nd ed. 1962, translated by Paolo Massimi). The book under review on the *German Volkshochschule*, written in exile and formed by the experience of Nazism and World War II, also deals with education and democracy, but differs from Borinski’s formerly published work in that it offers a thorough historical interpretation as well as a carefully reflected, hopeful

perspective on the future of post-war education in Europe. After the Nazis gained power, Borinski, a decidedly democratic socialist, had had to leave Germany for political and for so-called racial reasons. He lived in exile in Great Britain from 1934 until 1947, when he returned to Germany at the first opportunity offered to him. The work published here was written in London while the author worked for the German Educational Reconstruction (GER) Committee, a British-German nongovernmental organization preparing for the educational reconstruction of Germany after the defeat of Hitler. GER was active in preparing German exiles for their future work in German education and sharing German educational issues with international groups of politicians, educationists and scholars.

The present edition comprises Borinski's text with annotations, an introduction by the editor Martha Friedenthal-Haase,¹ a bibliography and an index, and a separate prosopographical appendix. Borinski's text is in English, the editor's contributions are in German. The introduction offers an interesting analysis of the life of Borinski, a 'homo politicus', and his engagement in adult education as one of the most prominent scholars in the field of professionalism and vocational training.

The book consists of six chapters: 1. The German Volkshochschulbewegung – a democratic and spiritual movement, 2. The Abendvolkshochschule (Evening Folk High-School) [– with an Excursus on the Academy of Labour], 3. Residential Colleges, 4. Some Problems of German Adult Education [with an attempt to assess achievement and failure of the Folk High-School movement], 5. The Fatal Slump, and 6. Some Reflections on the Future of German Adult Education. Borinski analyzes the institution of the typical German Adult Education Center, the Volkshochschule (literally "People's College"), which

¹ Martha Friedenthal-Haase, a prolific writer in the field, was professor of Adult Education at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, and visiting professor (2007-2009) at Boston University. From that time on she has been living in Brookline, Mass., as an independent scholar. She is a member of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame (University of Oklahoma).

originated in Germany in two different types, a residential and a nonresidential one. Most of the Volkshochschulen were founded after the First World War in the time of the first German democracy, the Weimar Republic, and it is not by chance that the founding years of the people's government are also the founding years of the People's College, the Volkshochschule. The Volkshochschule (Borinski often uses the rather oldfashioned translation: Folk High School) nowadays is the leading public institution for adult and continuing learning in reunited Germany. In their very early years the German Folk High Schools were inspired in part by the Danish model *Folkehøjskole* (based on ideas of N. F. S. Grundtvig) and in part by British reform movements, such as the Workers' Educational Association, the University Extension movement and the tradition of learning in residential Colleges as such. The intention of the book is twofold – to document and interpret the development of the German Folk High Schools under the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) and to draw from this experiment lessons for the future.

We are convinced that Borinski's work is a valuable source of information and reflection on democracy in education and especially on adult education teaching and learning methods. Furthermore, we believe that it will be of considerable interest for educators to learn how democratic adult education flourished in Germany during the first democratic period in the history of the country, and to study its relevance for the future development of the field.

The author deals with the democratic and spiritual movement of Folk High-Schools from the beginning, when education in Europe was going through a period of great change, culturally and politically. This period was a springboard for new ideas and educational experiments and was also characterized by substantial divisions and differences in educational theories and ideologies. Diverse conceptualizations of culture and society gave rise to antagonistic positions between the 'old' and the 'new' school of educational thought and reform. The new school of the period attacked the previous ideas of an elitist bourgeois society and focused on a democratic participation of the working class in adult education programs. We have, thanks to this book, the opportunity to see how different and interesting

the educational philosophy of the 'new school' was as a form of protest against the conception of adult education as a means of social welfare. The author, however, was himself an adherent of the 'new school' and perhaps not completely objective in his characterization of the 'old school'. The reader is informed about the growth of these different and conflicting directions, both intending to serve ordinary working men and women, one emphasizing intensive learning for individuals engaged in democratic change and cultural renewal, the other active in spreading knowledge and more or less conventional culture by bringing lectures, movies and books to a broad public.

The 'new direction' in adult education laid special emphasis on intensive learning in residential colleges and the book offers very lively and readable descriptions of living and learning in those German residential colleges. As mentioned before, the tradition of learning in residential colleges originated in part from England. The concept of residential colleges for young people, as "schools for life", came from Denmark forming the base of the Grundtvigian idea of a reformation of the nation through the education of adults.

An important section in the book deals with the creation of a syllabus. One will find descriptions on the one hand of the services and resources the old popular extension classes used to provide for everyone, and on the other hand of new forms of shaping the syllabus according to personal creativity and interests of the students. Each syllabus represented an experiment in itself that could be improved on the basis of the cooperation between instructors, adult students, and different social groups. The new style of syllabus went far beyond the classrooms leaving evident traces in implanting new forms and methods for adult education, based on experimentation and the real needs of people. Such flexible teaching and learning methods and modes of experiential and problem-based learning, as depicted by Borinski in the educational context of the Weimar Republic, are still regarded as progressive and promising by educators, trainers and researchers today.

For an international readership the passages about the movement's growth in the international panorama will be of particular interest. The author views the reform movement with an attentive eye on educational engagement, political

development and societal issues of the time. The variety of educational activities that were developed, such as educational camps for young people (university students, industrial workers and farmers), scholastic institutes for adult educational research and training, communal centers for adult learning (with women's departments) and rural residential colleges, to name just the most important of them, is astounding. All these initiatives were interwoven within the movement.

Of particular topical importance is the last chapter of the book dealing with the future of adult education in a Germany liberated, yet still in a time of crisis and reconstruction. The book supports the idea that education can prosper only in a democratic world that is based on freedom, equal opportunities for all, respect, responsibility and international cooperation. But free adult education is not only dependent on the existence of a sound democracy – it also is itself essential for sustaining the culture of democracy. The interdependence of democracy and the knowledge and mental attitudes of the citizens in a peaceful postwar order – that is the essence and still topical meaning of this work of Fritz Borinski, who understood in a crucial situation of world history and regime change in Germany to relate historical experience to the planning of a better future in Europe.

Humane historical, political, and societal reconstructions as offered in this book are meaningful opportunities to reflect on the roots of our research field. Thus one can understand the value of encountering perspectives of our predecessors in a well-identified historical framework.

We are grateful to Martha Friedenthal-Haase for her efforts to bring this book to life, and to give us the opportunity to learn about an important aspect of the research on Adult Education in Europe and in the world.