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The disorienting dilemma versus the event: Adult education, social change, and the theories of Jack Mezirow and Alain Badiou

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Abstract

We live in appalling times, in which it is almost impossible to remain hopeful; for radical adult educators, it is difficult to know what we should do in response. In this article, I draw on two theorists for possible inspiration. Jack Mezirow's perspective transformation theory is one of the most widely used of all adult learning theories, but also continues to be critiqued as a theory of social change. Alain Badiou's theory of the event has not as yet been considered within adult education. I consider whether and how these might help us think through our role in current times.

Keywords: Badiou, disorienting dilemma, event, Mezirow, social change

Introduction

> We want to break the world as it is. A world of injustice, of war, of violence, of discrimination, of Gaza and Guantanamo. A world of billionaires and a billion people who live and die in hunger. A world in which humanity is annihilating itself, massacring non-human forms of life, destroying the conditions of its own existence. A world ruled by money, ruled by capital. A world of frustration, of wasted potential. *We want to create a different world*. (Holloway, 2010a, p. 3)

These words were written over a decade ago; heartbreakingly, they remain as relevant now as then. Our current context is one of growing inequality, rampant violence, environmental destruction, 'the mutilation of human lives by capitalism' (Holloway, 2010b, p. 1). We need to change the world, now more than ever. What is the role of adult education, and adult educators, in this?

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This is a question which has been much on my mind for many years. In my own work, I have been particularly interested in the field of social movement learning; and in particular, what I, as an academic in the field of adult education, can learn from the struggles and learnings of social movements and social movement activists themselves. I have thought and written in particular about the South African shack dweller movement, Abahlali BaseMjondolo (see Harley, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2025). There is a growing body of work focusing on what we can learn from activists already struggling for social change, particularly within social movements (see, for example, Atta & Holst, 2023; Finnegan & Cox, 2023; Kapoor, 2009). This work considers the theoretical insights developed about and from these movements; and this is an important continuing area of work. However, I would argue, this does not mean that we should abandon theory that emanates from within the Academy. Rather, we need to engage with it, seeking what is useful and how to integrate this into what we can learn from struggle for social change itself.

Nearly 30 years ago, in a paper entitled *Adult education for social change: From center stage to the wings and back again*, Heaney (1996) considers the relationship between adult education and social change over time, concluding that in the mid-1990s, whilst there were signs suggesting increased interest in social goals, adult education 'remains an instrument for the legitimation and perpetuation of the status quo' (p. vii). This sentiment has been echoed more recently by others (see e.g., Mayo & Ranford, 2023). However, as these authors show, an alternative stream has existed throughout the history of adult education; a stream which has made social change a priority, working for a world fundamentally different from the one we have in terms of the structure of power relations. The ongoing question remains how we, as radical adult educators, best go about this.

One of the most widely used of all adult learning theories, often associated with emancipatory adult education, is that of Perspective Transformation, first developed by Jack Mezirow over 35 years ago (Hoggan et al., 2017); however, it continues to be subjected to critiques that it does not sufficiently offer a theory of power or of social change. Hoggan et al. (2017) show that this critique is in itself problematic; but argue that we need to go beyond perspective transformation theory, working between it and other theories of praxis.

In this article, I attempt to do that, by bringing into the conversation the Theory of the Event, as developed by French philosopher Alain Badiou, to consider its usefulness is helping us think through the role of adult education and adult educators in bringing about the radical social change which has become so necessary. Badiou has written very little on education; and although his relevance to the field of education as a whole is increasingly recognised particularly with the publication of the edited volume, *Thinking Education Through Alain Badiou* (den Heyer, 2010), to my knowledge, nothing has been published in English about his relevance to specifically the field of adult education.

Below, I outline Mezirow's and Badiou's theories (paying somewhat more attention to that of Badiou, because it is largely unknown within the field of adult education), before comparing and contrasting key aspects of the theories in relation to social change, and considering the implications of this for the field of radical adult education.

Mezirow's perspective transformation theory

Mezirow's theory should be seen as one that has evolved over time (Kitchenham, 2008), and also extensively critiqued. Below, I focus briefly on the theory as propounded by Mezirow himself, before considering an ongoing key critique – the relationship between individual perspective transformation and social change.

Mezirow argues that the way we see the world – our 'frame of reference' – is a product of our knowledge, our cultural background and language, and our human nature, and is often 'distorted' by these. However, if we experience a 'disorienting dilemma' – an experience which presents a dilemma to our worldview – we might undergo 'transformative learning', which can transform our perspective (Mezirow, 1990a, 2012). He gives as examples of such disorienting dilemmas things like a divorce, death, a change in job status (Mezirow, 1990a). This changes how we know, and how we see ourselves and our world. Mezirow argues that perspective transformation occurs through a three-part process (which is comprised of 10 phases (Mezirow, 1991)):

1. Critical reflection on one's assumptions (as a result of the disorienting dilemma)
2. Discourse to validate the critically reflective insight
3. Action (the type of action depends on the nature of dilemma) (Mezirow, 1997)

Mezirow (1990b) argues that 'Praxis is a requisite condition of transformative learning' (p. 356). However, because 'learning is a social process, but (…) takes place within the individual learner' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 60), 'we must begin with individual perspective transformations before social transformations can succeed' (Mezirow, 1990b, p. 363). Mezirow says that collective action will not necessarily come out of individual transformation, but the two are closely related.

As Hoggan et al. (2017) argue, 'Some of the most long-standing and sharpest debates about perspective transformation have been its claim to be an emancipatory form of adult education (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990; Inglis, 1997; Murray, 2013; Newman, 1994)' (p. 56). Collard and Law (1989) argued that a fundamental problem with Mezirow's theory is the lack of a coherent, comprehensive theory of social change. In any case, they argued, Mezirow's theory failed to adequately address questions of context and ideology, and they suggested that it is thus essentially liberal democratic in character (Collard & Law, 1989). Newman (1994) also argued that Mezirow failed to spell out the link between perspective transformation and social action. Inglis (1998), using Marx, argued that people's consciousness is determined by the political, economic and social structures within which they are situated. Thus, people need to know and understand these structures.

> I do not believe that the path to freedom begins with people critically reflecting about themselves, that is, becoming self-conscious, but rather developing a critical realist understanding of the structures within which they themselves and the society within which they live have been constituted. (Inglis, 1998, p. 72)

Thus 'the task is not so much to change our understanding of the world, but rather to change the structures through which this understanding is created and maintained' (Inglis, 1998, p. 73). Mezirow's weakness, according to Inglis, is that he does not have a theory of power, how it operates, and how it produces knowledge (Inglis, 1998). Without an analysis of power, transformative learning theory can be seen as a subtle form of self-control, rather than emancipation (Inglis, 1997). Inglis raises questions about Mezirow's individualist/domesticating emphasis on 'empowerment': 'By contrast, education for liberation and emancipation is a collective activity which has as its goal social and political transformation. If personal development takes place, it does so within that context. But this process involves structures rather than individuals' (Inglis, 1997, p. 14).

Mezirow has directly responded to many of these claims (Mezirow, 1989; 1997; 1998). He has argued that many of his critics have failed to understand, or have misrepresented, some of his key concepts and arguments. Indeed, Hoggan (2016) suggests that the general line of critique is ironic, since the theory 'was originally developed specifically to address the learning involved in broad social change' (p. 59); and according to Hoggan et al. (2017), much of the critique has 'become ritualistic and rhetorical and often degenerated into rather predictable defenses or denunciations of Mezirow's work' (p. 57). They argue that Mezirow's work continues to be an important resource for emancipatory adult education. Nevertheless, Hoggan et al. (2017) do feel that significant problems remain, in fact agreeing with some of the key critiques levelled at Mezirow:

> The overwhelming focus is change on an individual level (…) Mezirow systematically underestimates the socially structured, mediated, and contextual nature of both learning and social action (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Cunningham, 1991) and this leaves his theory insufficiently equipped to fully explain the dynamics and logic of social power (Inglis, 1997) (…) In summary, a sociological deficit, a tendency to methodological individualism, and a disregard of how social change occurs in complex mediated patterns leaves the question of how perspective transformation may or may not be linked to wider social change undertheorized. (Hoggan et al., 2017, pp. 59-60)

Hoggan et al. (2017) thus argue that there is a need to work between perspective transformation theory and other theories of praxis. Recently, some work has been done in this regard – Fleming (2021) for example, has considered how the critical theory of Oskar Negt might be brought into dialogue with Mezirow. However, it is to the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, and his theory of the event, that I wish to turn, given the (at first glance) tantalising similarities between Mezirow's concept of the disorienting dilemma and Badiou's concept of the event.

Badiou's theory of the event

Alain Badiou has been called 'one of France's foremost living philosophers' (Feltham & Clemens, 2003, p. 1) and an increasing number of his works have been recently translated into English. Like Mezirow, Badiou developed his theory over a considerable period of time – and indeed it is still developing. Badiou's work is complex, and made more so by his particular terminology (and the fact that he bases his theory on mathematics and set theory). Below I attempt to unpack and explain Badiou's terms and their relationship to his overall theory. Table 1 provides a summary of some his key concepts/terms, and examples of these in practice; but in my discussion, I have also drawn on my own context and experiences with Abhalali baseMjondolo, to help explain Badiou's admittedly difficult philosophy. There is also a growing body of scholarly work on Badiou, and I have drawn particularly on the work of noted Badiou scholars (and translators) Hallward (2004, 2008), Bosteels (2011), and Feltham and Clemens (2003) to help clarify some of Badiou's concepts; and on the work of Michael Neocosmos (2017a, 2017b, 2018), who has used Badiou in his own work on emancipatory thinking.

Badiou begins his theory with the philosophical concept of the *situation* (i.e., what is – this might be, for example, the current situation in a particular country, such as post-Apartheid South Africa; or it might be a painting. Badiou also refers to situations as 'worlds'). Badiou argues that before the situation, there is simply a 'multiplicity of multiplicities' (Badiou, 2005). When a situation comes into being, such multiplicities are either 'counted', or not – they become elements of the situation, or not (or, as he argues in more recent work, become more intense within that situation (Badiou, 2009)). Every

situation has its own way (its own *logic*) of authorising elements as legitimate members of that situation (Hallward, 2004); this is done by the state of the situation (which might literally be the nation state – so, the logic of the South African state in terms of what or who is counted, or not). It is important to note here that being included is not the same as belonging. An element might be included in the situation, but only as instances of the label that defines it, not in its own right (Hallward, 2004): So 'you can be included, but not belong, thus being effectively excluded' (Brancaleone, 2012, p. 64). The state of the situation, then, is at the level of representation (Badiou, 2014), and in particular representation of particular interests and identities (Neocosmos, 2017a).

However, Badiou argues, in every situation there must also be 'nothing', the *void*, the multiplicity of multiplicities, from which the situation is created; and since creating the situation requires counting things as elements, then those things that are not counted (that do not belong, do not qualify in terms of the 'logic') are uncounted, are the void (Hallward, 2004). The 'edge of the void' is that which hints at the existence of the void. In contemporary society, Badiou offers as examples immigrant workers in France or Britain, Jews in anti-Semitic situations, gays in homophobic situations – they are all 'in'/included in the situation, but only as instances of the label that defines them, not as individuals/human beings in their own right (Hallward, 2004) – they do not 'belong'. Shack dwellers in South Africa, whilst very much part of the post-apartheid landscape, are effectively excluded from the situation of the South African state. They do not count in their own right.

Some situations contain at least one 'evental site', at the edge of the void, a place where that which is not counted can come to be counted because the logic of the situation is overturned. This is the place where something decisive can happen in a situation, in which an '*event*' can take place (Hallward, 2004). Badiou offers as examples the French Revolution in the situation of the French monarchy, or Christ's resurrection in the situation of the Roman Empire. However, a change in the situation will only happen if there is in fact an event (which is not a given) *and* if there is then *fidelity* to the event.

An event is something momentous that 'is a profound transformation of the logic of the situation' (Badiou, 2014, p. 144), that can 'bring to pass "something other" than the situation' (Badiou, 2001, p. 67). This transformation disrupts what is counted/represented: 'the fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, to name, the situated void of that for which it is an event' (2001, p. 69). So the event names/counts the void. Badiou insists that the event is pure chance, 'the event is not the result of a decision' (Badiou, 2014, p. 144). Badiou suggests that certain 'worlds' (situations) may be more susceptible to an event (Hallward, 2008), and that they may be far more common than might be supposed (Badiou, 2009, p. 514).

In 2005, the shack dwellers of the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban, South Africa, blocked a major highway to protest the fact that land which had been promised to them by the state (in the form of the municipal government) had in fact been allocated to a private company. The shack dwellers had not planned their eruption – it came about because they noticed that the land (not far from the settlement) was being built on. The shack dwellers announced their existence, not as the label that defined them, but as those who did not count; in recognition of their existence, other shack dwellers in other settlements in Durban announced their own existence. Abahlali baseMjondolo was born.

> It has become clear that we do not count in our society. (...) It is taken as a crime for us to organise ourselves, to think for ourselves and to speak for ourselves. We do not have these entirely basic infrastructures simply because we are not recognised as human beings. (Zikode [president of the movement], 2016)

> If you are poor and black your life does not count to the government. Your dignity can be vandalised at any time. Your home can be destroyed at any time. You can be humiliated, robbed, assaulted and murdered by the police, the anti-land invasion units, private security or the army. (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020)

The problem is that events are ephemeral: 'the event is a hazardous, unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears' (Badiou, 2001, p. 67); 'the event is nothing – just a sort of illumination' (Badiou, 2014, p. 157). Because an event disrupts the state of the situation, overturns the logic, the state of the situation has a vested interest in denying the event, since 'the illegal and the unpresentable are precisely what [the state] expels' (Badiou, 2005, p. 208). So 'any evental site can, in the end, undergo a state of normalization' (Badiou, 2005, p. 176).

This means that an event is not sufficient for social change to occur. Rather, we need to recognise the event, name it, hold onto it. Badiou calls this *fidelity*. Fidelity 'amounts to a sustained investigation of the situation, under the imperative of the event itself; it is an imminent and continuing break' (Badiou, 2001, p. 67). Thus, whilst the event is not the result of a decision, there is a decision to be made: 'the decision is uniquely to be faithful to the transformation' of the event (Badiou, 2014, p. 144). Badiou cites as an example the Paris Commune's assertion 'We are nothing; let us be everything' (Badiou, 2001, p. 67). Abahlali say 'Our politics starts by recognising the humanity of every human being' (Zikode, 2008); and elsewhere (Harley, 2025), I have considered how Abahlali's philosophy of *ubuhlalism* constituted a rupture and sustained investigation of the situation.

The point is that 'fidelity is a practical matter; you have to organize something, to do something' (Badiou, 2006, response 2). Part of what this involves is 'wagering the truth'; and this requires turning to Badiou's epistemology.

Badiou insists that truth and knowledge are two entirely different things. For Badiou, knowledge is the capacity to discern elements within a situation and classify them by naming them (Badiou, 2005). So knowledge is only naming that which is already counted. 'In a situation there is always an encyclopedia of knowledge which is the same for everybody. But the access to this knowledge is very different' (Badiou, 2014, p. 143) – certain people have access to certain knowledge. Truth is something very different; and 'the process of truth is not necessary but contingent' (Badiou, 2014, p. 155); it is contingent on fidelity to the event, it emerges from fidelity to the event; it is a recognition of what was not counted, what is outside of the logic of the situation, that has been revealed by the event. And it is accessible to everyone.

> Truth, in my conviction, is a transformation – not of the being of a situation, because it remains the same – but of the logic of the situation. A truth is a transformation of the articulation of the multiplicity of the situation – its logic – and this transformation is linked to contingency, both of the event and of the situation. A truth doesn't express a necessity of the situation. It expresses the contingency of the situation, the sort of contingency which is linked to the central ontological void of the situation. (Badiou, 2014, pp. 155-156)

Critically, 'each truth is at once singular and universal' (Badiou, as cited in Bensaïd, 2004, p. 95): truth is internal to the situation (i.e., singular), because it emerges from an event, which as we know occurs only within a specific situation; but also universal, because it is 'the same for all' (Badiou, 2001, p. 27). Anyone has access to the truth, because 'we have an access from the event itself and not from preconstituted knowledge' (Badiou, 2014, p. 150).

Truth always profoundly affects knowledge: 'A truth is always that which makes a hole in a knowledge' (Badiou, 2005, p. 327): 'The truth is not a question of knowledge; it is

the *defection* of knowledge' (Badiou, 2014, p. 150). So 'we must conceive of a truth both as the construction of a fidelity to an event, and as the generic potency of a transformation of a domain of knowledge' (Badiou, 2003, p. 58).

This is what makes truth so utterly different from knowledge: 'Knowledge does not know of the event because the name of the event is supernumerary, and so it does not belong to the language of the situation' (Badiou, 2005, p. 329). Yet because a truth is constituted in the indiscernible (it is about what is not, what is outside of the situation), we do not deductively 'prove' that it is so, we assert that it is. 'A truth begins with an *axiom of truth*. It begins with a groundless decision – the decision to *say* that the event has taken place' (Badiou, 2003, p. 62). So truth is a wager.

The fact that a truth has to be wagered is a fundamentally crucial point, because it means that *someone* has to wager the truth. 'It is that which is not there which is important. The appearing of that which is not there; this is the origin of every real subjective power!' (Badiou, 2006, cited and translated by Neocosmos, 2017b, p. 406). According to Badiou, it is this recognition of the event – the recognition of the existence of that which was not counted in the situation – through wagering a new truth that creates the subject: Thus, 'not every human being is always a subject, yet some human beings become subjects; those who act in fidelity to a chance encounter with an event which disrupts the situation they find themselves in' (Feltham & Clemens, 2003, p. 6). It is possible for a subject to recognise an event, but be indifferent towards it. Badiou terms this a reactive subject (Badiou, 2014). It is also possible for the subject who has been faithful to an event to betray this: 'Unfaithfulness is when a subject is constituted by faithfulness but that faithfulness disappears' (Badiou, 2014, p. 158). The subject created by fidelity to an event is, in Badiou's term, a *militant*: 'A fidelity is not a matter of knowledge. It is not the work of an expert: it is the work of a militant' (Badiou, 2005, p. 329). It is important to note that the militant is not connected to an identity (e.g., the working class, or the party – or a shack dweller), because identity and interests are the realm of the situation; subjectivity is thus an explosion of identity and interests. Anyone can retain fidelity to an event and the truth it reveals; anyone can become a militant subject.

Subjectivity is immanent to the situation, because it does not emanate from beyond the situation, but it is also exceptional to it (Neocosmos, 2017b). In response to the xenophobic violence then sweeping South Africa, Abahlali stated 'There is only one human race (…) A person is a person wherever they may find themselves' (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2008). In this assertion, Abahlali held onto the truth revealed by the xenophobia, of the universality of humanity, a radical universal humanism as opposed to the Western liberal universality of 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity', which rests on identities and interests (Neocosmos, 2017b). In my own thinking, Abahlali's political philosophy of *ubuhlalism* constitutes the axiomatic truth that has emerged from the 'event' of Abahlali, and to which Abahlali or anyone else can retain fidelity – or not; and elsewhere I have discussed this in detail (Harley, 2025). I argue that *ubuhlalism* rests on a number of interrelated truths and their consequences: that all people count, and count equally, and therefore, all people should be treated with dignity, always; all people think, and therefore, all people should be integrally involved in making decisions about their own lives; and that thinking must lead to (prefigurative) action.

Fidelity to the event also means an immediate understanding of the situation: 'My conviction is that everybody who is engaged in faithfulness to an event has an understanding of the situation' (Badiou, 2014, p. 150). Badiou concedes that we can think the ontological structure of a situation (although this can be difficult), but 'the crucial point is, are we able to understand the situation from the point of view of truth or only from the point of view of knowledge?' (Badiou, 2014, p. 149).

Badiou's concept of 'immanent exception' becomes important here:

> The subject's potential is this, the immanent exception, the possibility for an individual to participate in an imminent exception and consequently no longer to be a pure and simple product of [their] own concrete conditions, their own family, background, education. They are all of those things..., but they also have the possibility, from within them all [those things], to become involved in a process that's a little different…there's also the idea of a beginning in the immanent exception… That beginning may not last, but it's not just a result of the past; it's also a pure present, a radical beginning, a beginning that can't be inferred from the past (Badiou, 2015, cited in Neocosmos, 2017b, p. 405[1]).

So the immanent exception is marked by what is, but is beyond it. It is the overturning of the logic of the situation by someone who now emerges as a subject. The immanent exception is the event held in the thought of the (newly emerged) subject, 'a moment when one can declare to be possible something which the weight of the world declares to be impossible' (Badiou, 2012, as cited in Neocosmos, 2017b, p. 405).

Table 1: Badiou's terminology (author's own table)

Terminology	***Examples from Badiou***
Situation (in more recent writing, also called 'world')	A painting, a battle, a political demonstration; France; capitalism
State of the situation: the 'logic' of the situation	Capitalism; the nation state
The void: the excluded, the things not counted in the situation, the things excluded by the 'logic' of the situation; but also what must be there for the situation to exist in the first place	The great majority of people today; the proletariat, shack dwellers; immigrant workers in France or Britain, Jews in anti-Semitic situations, LGBTQI+ people in homophobic/anti-LGBTQI+ situations
Event: that which disrupts the logic of the situation, and reveals the void	The French Revolution; Christ's resurrection; but equally, falling in love. There are also events in thinking.
Fidelity to the event	The Paris Commune's assertion 'We are nothing; let us be everything'

As with Mezirow, Badiou has been subjected to a number of critiques. Clearly, one of the greatest 'problems' with Badiou's theory of the event relates to the role of, and the possibility of, praxis. If events are pure chance, and not the result of a decision, what does this mean for political and social change, for agency, for political will to create change? Hallward (2004), for example, is critical of the fact that Badiou refuses to allow that events can be anticipated or prepared for, that they are always random, and in no way linked to the historical context. Can events not be the result of preliminary acts of resistance? Is it not more true to say they are 'relatively' unpredictable? (Badiou later conceded that certain 'worlds' (situations) may be more susceptible to an event (Hallward, 2008)).

There is another problem, related to this issue, once one moves to the issues of fidelity and truth. Düttman (2004) suggests that Badiou's own discussion of fidelity suggests that fidelity makes the event happen in the first place, it 'triggers' the event: 'without fidelity, the event wouldn't happen' (Düttman, 2004, p. 203, fn.): 'So possibly an event only comes about retroactively, through the naming of its existence, and the fidelity to the truth which comes to light in it' (Bensaïd, 2004, p. 97). Hallward (2004)

also argues that Badiou does not adequately explain the process by which some people become a militant subject, and others not.

In relation to the truth, Hallward (2004) criticises Badiou's insistence that there can be no subject within the event, only after it, because this means that truth is isolated from the situation. Hallward asks whether truth can really be isolated from other aspects of the situation. He is also critical of the claim that truth comes only to those who have recognised the event and retained fidelity to it. Hallward believes Badiou thereby rejects motivation or resolve in subjective decisions. This seems to devalue political will, something which Feltham and Clemens (2003) also argue.

Hallward (2008) has argued that 'Badiou may be more willing today than previously to recognise that the critical analysis of ideology and hegemony may have something to contribute to the pursuit of justice and equality' (p. 107). However, Hallward argues, we need to privilege history, not logic; and political will, not just truth, and feels that Badiou still does not allow sufficiently for the role of power, struggle and hegemony.

Thus the fundamental critique of Badiou's theory, as argued by Livingstone (2009), is the potential for agency it allows:

> Insofar as Badiou's theory of evental change (...) demands that the event, if it is to be truly transformative, amounts to the sudden, unpredictable advent to appearance of a kind of phenomenon that could not possibly be discerned within the previously existing situation, it seems to deprive us of the possibility of anticipating, even in vague outline, these possibilities of radical change or locating their sites of appearance until after the event. Thus, it is not clear that Badiou's elaborate theory can actually play a significant role – despite its strong rhetoric – in supporting the kinds of change it ostensibly envisions. (Livingstone, 2009, final paragraph)

Discussion: Mezirow, Badiou, the nature of social change and the role of emancipatory adult educators

Clearly, both Mezirow and Badiou are concerned with the problem of social change. As discussed above, in the late 1980s Mezirow was instrumental in attempts to revive the involvement of adult education in social action (Heaney, 1996), and his perspective transformation theory is rooted in emancipatory traditions, being informed by inter alia Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas (Kitchenham, 2008). However, Newman (1994) argues that Mezirow does not appear to see the need for a radical transformation of society:

> In Mezirow's discourse society can be perceived as essentially stable since towards the end of the process of perspective transformation he gives the learner the option of reintegration. The learner is perceived as an individual, seeking a new role for him or herself and that seems to me to be a readjustment. (Newman, 1994, p. 240)

In contrast, Badiou's theory takes as it point of departure the urgent necessity for change, and Badiou has been politically active throughout his life, having been profoundly affected by the 'event' of 1968. It is his analysis of the way the world is that forms the basis of his politics and of his theory of the event: 'Today the great majority of people do not have a name: the only name available is 'excluded', which is the name of those who do not have a name. Today the great majority of humanity counts for nothing' (Badiou, quoted in Neocosmos, 2009, p. 265).

Badiou's most fundamental principle is:

> simply the belief that radical change is indeed possible, that it is possible for people and the situations they inhabit to be dramatically transformed by what happens to them. He affirms this infinite capacity for transformation as the only appropriate point of departure for thought, and he affirms it in advance of any speculation about its enabling conditions or ultimate horizons. (Hallward, 2004, p. 2)

As we can deduce from the overview of their theories above, Mezirow and Badiou show a markedly different understanding of how social change occurs – and this has profound implications for adult education and adult educators, as the final section of this article will show.

Both theorists understand that society is shaped by particular structures and ideologies, which affect how we view our world. As discussed above, Mezirow argues that we have a 'frame of reference', 'a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences' (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 1): i.e. our meaning perspectives and our meaning schemes. Generally, we acquire our meaning perspective from socialisation; and generally, our meaning perspective is 'distorted' in various ways. Mezirow refers to different kinds of distortions, some of which appear similar to Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971): epistemic distortions are about the nature and use of knowledge (including seeing phenomena as beyond human control), whilst sociocultural distortions are about taking beliefs for granted, especially those currently prevailing and legitimised, or taking the interests of the sub-group as the general interest of the whole. As discussed above, in his ontology, Badiou shows how the 'state of the situation' uses an organising 'logic' to count certain things, and discount or exclude others; and in this process, always to consolidate the power of the dominant group. Part of this organising logic is hegemony, as Gramsci (1971) has conceived it. In his political philosophy, Badiou now argues that hegemonic ideas are used to disguise the real situation or to explain what is currently happening in a deceitful manner, and to discourage any belief in the possibility of meaningful change. Both theories are thus concerned to some extent with how our reality is shaped, and how this affects our understanding of it.

For Mezirow, any social change inherently requires that we first become aware of how our perspectives are shaped – and this is what transformative learning (perspective transformation) is all about. It is:

> the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminatory integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6)

For Mezirow, the process of change thus starts with the 'disorienting dilemma', something that happens that unsettles the way we see the world; if we critically reflect on this, our perspective might be transformed, and we may act differently. According to Mezirow, critical reflection is not just thinking about one's actions or beliefs, but also the circumstances of their origin. Clearly, this echoes Paulo Freire's (1972) argument for the need for conscientisation, through which people would come to understand the nature of their oppression and have the power to transform reality; and Kitchenham (2008) and others have shown how Mezirow's concepts were informed by Freire's work as well as by Habermas' emancipatory domain of learning. However, as Newman (1994) argues, Mezirow departs from the Freirean concept of conscientisation in that perspective transformation 'does not impel the learner actively into the flow of social history in the way Freire argues that conscientization will' (pp. 239-240); as I discuss later, Mezirow himself has confirmed this.

Cranton (2011) argues that for Mezirow, individual transformation must precede any kind of social transformation; and Mezirow maintains that transformative learning is a three-part process of which the last is action (Mezirow, 1997). Badiou also argues for something that unsettles, the 'event', but this is rather different from Mezirow's 'disorienting dilemma'. Mezirow's dilemma is based within the individual; it is an unsettling of the individual meaning perspective. Badiou's event, on the other hand, is not within the individual, but in the very structure of being; it is an unsettling of the logic of the situation. It holds the potential that everything will change for everyone, not just one person. As we have seen, the event brings about *the possibility* of fundamental change (it is not change itself):

> The event is Christ's resurrection, it is the storming of the Bastille, it is the October Revolution, just as it is illegal immigrant workers [or the shack dwellers] taking to the streets in order to become agents in their own right, in order to break out of their status as clandestine victims; it is the unemployed stepping out from the ranks of statistics to become subjects of resistance, or the sick refusing to resign themselves to being mere patients and attempting to think and act their own illnesses. (Bensaïd, 2004, p. 97)

The event itself, as we know, is not sufficient – it is fidelity to the event, and the wager of a new truth, that is what actually changes everything for everyone. This is because truth is eternal; a truth 'explodes' time – once a truth has been declared it will always have been true, and will always be true (Hallward, 2003). Wagering the truth has to be done by someone; but it can be anyone (the illegal immigrant, the shack dweller, or the philosophy professor). Crucially, it is a practical question, not a matter of theory (Bensaïd, 2004, p. 95), so 'truth (...) is not the result of a laborious process of self-reflection' (Barbour, 2010, p. 253). For Badiou, it is not so much about reflection as about the axiomatic wager, on which you then act. Fidelity to the event is an assertion that the event has happened, that it changed everything irrevocably, and that it has changed everything for everyone – that which did not count, the void, was there all along; but this is exposed by the event and not through critical reflection on the situation as it is (since this can only ever be framed by what is already counted, by knowledge). And as Badiou says, 'fidelity is a practical matter; you have to organize something, to do something' (Badiou, 2006, response 2).

For Badiou, the ultimate social change (event-fidelity-truth) is precisely not at the level of the individual, ever. Unlike Mezirow's individual transformation first, Badiou's event, the 'aha' moment, must be universal if it is to be the truth; and the truth is for everyone. The declared truth by Abahlali that every person is a person wherever they find themselves has always been, and will always be, true, and true for everyone. Anyone can claim fidelity to this truth; but, for Badiou, fidelity requires that this be in practice, not simply in thought.

Badiou differs significantly from many contemporary post-structural French philosophers in that he uses agency, rather than identity, as his point of departure; but because of his understanding of the subject, agency is a rather different concept than the norm:

> For Badiou, the question of agency is not so much a question of how a subject can initiate an action in an autonomous manner but rather how a subject emerges through an autonomous chain of actions within a changing situation. That is, it is not everyday actions or decisions that provide evidence of agency for Badiou. It is rather those extraordinary decisions and actions which isolate an actor from their context, those actions which show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports new chains of actions and reactions. (Feltham & Clemens, 2003, p. 6)

Retaining fidelity to the event, as we have seen, gives immediate access to an understanding of the situation, from the point of view of truth (rather than knowledge), because the truth ruptures the situation, exposing the logic of what structured it. This is somewhat different to Mezirow, for whom understanding the situation comes through critical reflection on it, and how one has been shaped by it. Whilst Mezirow suggests existential change because of the learning process, it is through knowledge; and Mezirow retained a scepticism about the possibility of any one 'truth'. This brings us to the fundamental difference between knowledge and truth as asserted by Badiou. As we have seen, Badiou insists that knowledge is of the naming/counting of the state of the situation. Thus, acquiring new knowledge remains within the paradigm of the state of the situation. Truth, on the other hand, is precisely that which was indiscernible within the state of the situation, and is unclassifiable according to the 'encyclopedia' of knowledge. However, this does not mean Badiou rejects thought – he is clearly suggesting a very important place for thought, and for thinking through/about/with truth.

Here I want to turn to the work of Michael Neocosmos, who has drawn on Badiou in his work on emancipatory thought and his conceptions of excessive versus expressive thought. His work helps us understand Badiou's complex political philosophy, and in particular the role of dialectical thought. Neocosmos draws in particular on Badiou's notion of 'immanent exception', that fact that 'dialectical thought does not begin from the rule but from the exception' (Badiou, cited in Neocosmos, 2017a). Dialectical thought in this conception combines the thought of what is, the situation, the extant, with the thought of the apparently impossible/what does not and cannot exist:

> One way of understanding this idea is to grasp emancipatory politics as exceptional, in other words as 'excessive' of the social; but this excess is always of the thought of social place; hence it can only be thought as located in the particular. As a result all experience of emancipatory politics form a dialectical combination of expressive and excessive thought (Neocosmos, 2017a, p. 10).

However, as discussed above, fidelity (and hence dialectical thought) must be a practice: 'a dialectical political process… can only be experienced as practice' (Neocosmos, 2017a, p. 14).

As discussed above, Badiou understands the situation to count only some, and to count them often only as a 'label'. This is the basis of identity politics, in which competing interests are in tension. Emancipatory thinking, emancipatory politics, must rupture this: 'This is what emancipatory political thought consists of, this is where it is located – otherwise politics is just reacting to interests and identities. It's fundamental today that we think beyond identities, otherwise we will end up killing each' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 35).

So, for Neocosmos (as for Badiou), emancipatory thought and emancipatory politics 'is always founded on some kind of universal humanity, of equality, of justice, of dignity – these are the requirements for human emancipation' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 36). Neocosmos is also familiar with Abahlali baseMjondolo – and, like me, recognised in their early politics this kind of emancipatory thinking and politics; something which is not necessarily present in struggles for social change. As Neocosmos says, 'the idea of universal humanity is rarely placed at the centre of politics…It is not a feature of popular rebellions' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 37). Mostly, 'politics' rests on a claim for particular interests to be recognised, and this is frequently a feature of social movements. This is not emancipatory. 'If they are arguing, however, that they want their interests to be recognised because…all human beings must be treated the same, then they are saying

something else' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 39). 'The struggle for freedom is never a narrow identitarian struggle. It may end up like that, of course, but then this means that the emancipatory content of the struggle has been lost and state identitarian politics has become dominant' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 39) – i.e., the logic of the situation has been reinscribed, as Badiou warns is so often the case.

So what do Mezirow's and Badiou's theories have to say to help radical adult educators work towards 'a different world'? Mezirow was obviously specifically writing about adult education, so discussions on this are explicitly included in his work. Badiou was not writing about adult education, and as I have said above, his work does not appear to have been discussed within the field, at least in English; we thus have to deduce implications from his work. Below I begin what I hope will be an ongoing conversation about possible implications.

For all his work is highly influential and often used to discuss questions of emancipation and social change with the field of adult education, Mezirow argues that 'adult educators have differing views on whether individual or social transformations are the ultimate goals of adult education' (Mezirow, 1990b, p. 363); and saw social action as only a 'contingent and instrumental goal' of the adult educator (Mezirow, 1989, p. 172). Both Heaney (1996) and Newman (1994) argue that for Mezirow the real task of the adult educator is facilitating the kind of learning that will help perspective transformation (and thus *might* lead to action for social change), and not as leader or organiser of action. This is indeed what Mezirow himself says:

> Transformation theory – and adult educators – can promise only to help the first step of political change, emancipatory education that leads to personal transformation, and to share the belief that viable strategies for *public* change will evolve out of this. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 210; my emphasis – note the use of 'public' as opposed to e.g., 'social' or 'radical')

In fact, Mezirow is very clear that it is not the role of the adult educator to take action, or to encourage learners to do so. 'Educators do not set out to effect a specific political action; this is indoctrination' (Mezirow, 1989, p. 172):

> As learners come to be critically reflective of the presuppositions upon which their beliefs are predicated and learn about their sources and consequences, meaning transformations become possible. A part of the process is discovering that one is not alone in his or her problem, that there are social practices and institutions which also oppress others as well … When learners come to identify with others who have been similarly oppressed, collective social action may develop and it is desirable and appropriate that it do so. But this is the learner's decision, not the educator's. (Mezirow, 1989, p. 172)

In contrast to Mezirow's position with adult education, as I have already pointed out, Badiou is largely unknown in the field. Badiou's theory has never been intended as a learning theory – his is first and foremost political philosophy (although, clearly, it applies far more widely than that) – and I am not aware that anyone has attempted to use it in this way. It does seem to me that there are some extraordinary similarities in some of the language that Badiou uses and that of theorists such as Mezirow (and, also for that matter, Peter Jarvis and Paulo Freire), particularly in their attempts to account for the growing disjuncture many people feel between their lived reality and current hegemonic ideas. However, as we have seen, there are clearly fundamental differences.

Clearly, Badiou requires something dramatically different from the adult educator than Mezirow does. In terms of Badiou's theory, there is no role for us to play in encouraging critical reflection in our learners from within the realm of 'knowledge'; or even to undertake this for ourselves. However, drawing on Neocosmos' use of Badiou, I think

that part of what we have to do is to believe (and argue) that change is actually possible, since this is precisely what the logic of the situations denies:

> Outside of hegemonic political liberalism today all that exists is a void; in other words alternative modes of politics are considered to be impossible, utopian, impracticable. When events happen, they force us, for a while at least, to think of the situation differently (Neocosmos, 2017b, p. 407).

Our task is then to recognise events when we see them/experience them, and then retain fidelity to them and the truths that they reveal: '"This event has taken place, it is something which I can neither evaluate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful"' (Badiou, 2003, p. 62). Obviously, we are not uniquely qualified to do this, since 'it is not the work of an expert: it is the work of a militant' (Badiou, 2005, p. 329). It involves, in my understanding, a fundamental commitment to radical universal humanism, and a resistance to the organising logic that seeks to return the situation to normal; to use my example of Abahlali, it is not a given that the movement will retain fidelity to the radical universal humanism of *ubuhalism* (as discussed above), particularly given the relentless pressure of the normalising (identity politics) logic of the contemporary South Africa state. As I have argued above, the state (any state) represents, and as soon as the universal is represented it loses its universality. It is perfectly possible that the movement could, for example, in negotiations with the state, agree to act and think on behalf of shackdwellers (i.e. to represent them); or agree that only some (e.g., citizens) deserve the right to remain in settlement. As Neocosmos argues, emancipatory political subjectivities are limited in time, 'they arise and then they fade away, usually reverting to state identitarian politics' (2018, response to Question 9). Thus, part of what we need to do is to retain the dialectic of thought.

It must be stressed that this is a fundamentally different thing from seeing ourselves as some kind of truth-holders, who then need to pass on our revealed truths to others and lead their struggle. It is 'imperative (…) for intellectuals and activists not to substitute themselves for the struggling people' (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 48). Rather, we have to recognise that all people can experience an event, recognise the truths it reveals, and retain fidelity to it in thought and practice; all people, without exception, are capable of thinking beyond their interests, beyond the extant, excessive to the situation (although of course they do not necessarily do this).

Badiou's theory of the event requires of us that we retain a belief in the possibility of change; that we recognise and take a decision to declare that an event has taken place that exposes the uncounted in current times; that we retain fidelity to this, however inconvenient, in thought and practice. It requires that we assert that every human being matters, and hold onto that as the logic of the situation tries to 'normalise' it by reinscribing identity and interest as the basis for discussion. We need to be outspoken about the genocide in Gaza, not because we recognise the right of Palestine to exist as a state, or 'Palestinian' as an identity, or the rights of the people of Gaza to have their interests recognised and protected; but because every human life matters equally.

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered Mezirow's perspective transformation theory, and the theory of the event of Alain Badiou, comparing and contrasting key aspects of their theories in relation to social change, and considering the implications of this for radical adult educators who are concerned with fundamental social change. I argue that Badiou's

theory of event potentially offers a radically different way of understanding social change, and the role we could play.

Although Badiou is insistent that critical reflection cannot actually bring about change in itself, I do think it might be useful to explore some of the ideas I have suggested above, and possibly others, further. These include a greater understanding of how hegemony/our world views are structured to 'count'/'not-count' people or groups of people; and how this can be disrupted to create new structures, and new 'truths'. Badiou's understanding of dialectical thought in relation to emancipatory politics (and Neocosmos' expressive versus excessive thought) is also clearly a useful avenue for further thinking and discussion. Badiou's understanding of the fundamental difference between knowledge and truth also seems to be a very fruitful area for future exploration within emancipatory adult education.

In practice, as radical adult educators we could ensure that in our pedagogy we retain fidelity to the truth that all people are capable of thought; and in our curricula we retain fidelity to universal humanism. It means, first and foremost, sticking to these kinds of truths in the face of the relentless logic of representation and narrow identity politics of our national governments and institutions: as Badiou argues:

> From an emancipatory perspective, there is always a moment when one is obliged to say that a possibility results from an active confrontation between the state of the world on the one hand and principles on the other; a moment when one can declare to be possible something which the weight of the world declares to be impossible. (Badiou, 2012, as cited in Neocosmos, 2017b, p. 405)

Finally, I want to return to the field of social movement learning, and how this can help us think what is to be done. Obviously, many movements do not move beyond narrow identitarian interests – they remain within the logic of the situation. Obviously, not all movement activists experience an event, or recognise it, or retain fidelity to it in thought and practice. But from my own work, it seems to me that it is possible that some movements, at least, have experienced an event; recognised it; and retained fidelity to it (at least for a while). They have (at least for a while) become subjects. They have been exposed to 'truths', which they have often attempted to share. This has perhaps not been closely enough considered from a social movement learning perspective. What 'events' have social movements experienced? Which have they retained fidelity to? What have they learned from this? Why do they/not retain fidelity to them? What kinds of truths have emerged in this process for a more just, less brutal world?

Notes

[1] I have substituted he/she in the original quotation for the more inclusive 'they'.

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