European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2026, pp. 7-22

Editorial: Adult learning in, and for, social change: Revolutionary transformations and everyday empowerment

Fergal Finnegan
Maynooth University, Ireland (fergal.finnegan@mu.ie)
Convenor of the ESREA Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning network

Maja Maksimovic
University of Belgrade, Serbia (maksimovic.ma@gmail.com)
Convenor of the ESREA Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning network

Diana Holmquist
Linköping University, Sweden (diana.holmqvist@liu.se)
Convenor of the ESREA Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning network

Global societal challenges have intensified, inequalities have become more pronounced, and new social conflicts have arisen. The consequences of the ecological crisis are becoming increasingly evident, and while the rhetoric of mainstream politics includes aspirations towards a green future, it appears that political efforts are not making any significant strides to addressing the systemic causes of the climate crisis and in sustainability more generally. Racism and xenophobia are on the rise, political regimes in Europe and elsewhere are moving towards authoritarianism, and elections, a basic element of citizenship, are being compromised.

These changes and challenges have, as one would expect, loomed large in the conferences and meetings of the ESREA Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning (ADCAL) network in recent years. We have mainly focussed on how, in these circumstances, adult learning and education (ALE) does, or might, support democracy. Meaningful active citizenship depends on the sustained political engagement of individuals, groups, communities, and movements. Opportunities for participation and genuine accountability of powerholders are vital for democracy. Movements which seek to advance participation and ensure accountability, combined with struggles for recognition, redistribution, and sustainability are the wellsprings of a living democracy. Research tells us that intense and widespread participation in active citizenship also generates rich social learning and leads to the creation of new knowledge inside as well as outside of formal education (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991).

ISSN 2000-7426

http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.6461
www.rela.ep.liu.se

We know that active citizenship is often hard to sustain and requires a great deal of tenacity and hope to achieve transformative social change. As such social movements and living democracies rely on, and feed into, a collective capacity to imagine alternative futures (Castoriadis, 1975). In many quarters people discern a winnowing and narrowing of this imaginative capacity. Part of this is due to the failure of state socialism and national liberation struggles to live up to their promises. The decline of radical imagination is also connected to the neoliberalisation of society and education globally (Brenner et al., 2010; Harvey, 2005). Fifty years of the promotion of individualism, competition, and marketisation, the key messages of what have been termed *neoliberal public pedagogies* (Giroux, 2004), have also corroded our capacity to envision progressive change. Alongside institutional and policy changes, this has had a remarkable impact on adult education (Bowl, 2017). Combined with the crises mentioned above this has contributed to an escalating mood of pessimism and even despair among communities and movements dedicated to democracy. Even in moments of mass mobilisation, as we have seen in many places in recent years power holders often succeed in neutralising them, either through media manipulation or by undermining their cohesion and momentum from within. This dynamic further amplifies a sense of helplessness and frustration, stifling the collective imagination necessary for envisioning alternative futures.

In these circumstances ADCAL believes it is important to critically reflect on the idea that adult education can, and should, foster and support progressive change. What do we mean by social change and how exactly does it come about? Theories of perspective transformation, participatory practices, pragmatist notions of democracy, notions of empowerment and emancipation are used widely in ALE scholarship. The ideas overlap but there are significant differences in the way this is envisaged by various thinkers in terms of scale, the temporalities of social change, the key actors involved and the precise role given learning and education. We think this is worth carefully reflecting upon. One helpful departure point here is offered by Erik Olin Wright (2010) who distinguishes between ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic theories of transformative change. A rupture in the social order can occur through unexpected natural events and through social collapse but also comes about through revolutionary action. Interstitial change happens by building new ways of living and thinking in communities and subcultures which build 'a new world in the shell of the old'. Symbiotic change effects changes through developing new practices and cultures within existing institutions, it is adaptive and evolutionary and does not require a ruptural event or an oppositional counterculture. In the history of adult education for citizenship and democracy there are examples of initiatives and theories which are ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic and often projects which combine these approaches in varied ways, and it is worth reflecting upon and debating how we understand these patterns in relation to ALE.

In this Special Issue we explore the way social change is envisaged in revolutionary processes as well as in less dramatic terms through conceptions of empowerment and transformation. The contributors examine the role of adult education and learning in social change processes from various perspectives in a range of national contexts (Portugal, Belarus, Slovenia, Greece, South Africa) and diverse settings (workplace organising, protests, social movements ALE institutions, communities). The questions are explored theoretically, historically and empirically and link social change to a range of political concerns and ideals – ecology, social class, housing, animal right, civic movements, equality and democracy. The issue illuminates some of the challenges faced by progressive activists and educators who seek to advance progressive social change but, reflecting the focus and concerns of ADCAL, above all it explores what is learnt in struggles for social change why this is valuable. The issue is also full of insights on what

can be done practically and intellectually to support movement learning, active citizenship, and engaged adult education.

Revolution: A vanished imaginary?

Although revolutionary situations continue to occur frequently (Barker et al., 2021) and there are places such as Rojava and Chiapas where revolutionary institutions are currently in the place the idea of revolution is rarely discussed in contemporary European or American adult education research[1]. This is striking, since the 'revolutionary horizon' was such an important feature of twentieth century history and this impacted directly on adult education (Steele, 2007, 2010). We would go so far as to say that it is impossible to understand the past 200 years either in Europe or globally without taking account of revolutions as an ideal, as a constellation of images, and as political and cultural events (Traverso, 2021). Think of how impactful the revolutions in France and Haiti in the 1790s, Russia in 1917 and the events in Eastern Europe in 1989-1991 have been. Bring to mind the wave of anticolonial revolutions that sought to dismantle structures of exploitation and subjugation throughout the mid-twentieth century. Consider also the impact of 'blocked' revolutions in Spain in 1936 or Chile in 1973.

For most of the twentieth century revolutionary programmes mobilised bodies and minds and gave rise to novel ideas and visions of the future radically at odds with the present. The vision of a rupture in the order of things, of 'the world turned upside down', opened up space to imagine new and more just societies. Revolutionary hopes inspired massive protests, insurrections and in some societies led to wholesale change of political, legal, and economic institutions. Just as importantly the same horizon sustained all sorts of 'slow burn' activism in campaigns, trade unions and civil society. Without attending to revolutionary hopes and the bitter experience of defeated revolutions it is difficult to fully understand the history of active citizenship and democracy and impossible to trace the ways it has influenced the way social change is conceptualised and practiced today[2]. However, 'we now live in a world in which these radical visions are often mocked rather than taken seriously' (Wright, 2010, p. 6) and one of the aims of the special issue is to reflect on this and to think 'against the grain'.

But the connection to ALE goes beyond the 'imaginaries' of citizenship. It is about how cultural and educational processes link, or not, to political revolutions. Revolutions are not just political phenomena – they have many dimensions (including technological, conceptual moral and ethical). They are more than a dramatic 'event' and entail learning and education before and after a revolutionary period. As Raymond Williams (1961) points out, cultural revolutions can occur through discontinuous, lengthy, incremental processes and as Freire (1972, see especially chapter 4) argues you can have a situation where there is a dramatic seizure of power but unless the revolution becomes an ongoing participatory learning process it will, in the medium term, fail. A political revolution is prepared for and sustained by developing new forms of culture and education. This type of thinking, with varied ideological inflections, influenced many of the mass literacy campaigns in Cuba, Nicaragua and Timor Leste and remarkable attempts to rethink education altogether in places such as Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde allowing the revolution there (Freire, 1978). A similar ethic informed the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa (Hamilton & Cooper, 2024). The connection to critical literacy studies, critical pedagogy (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1972; Hooks, 2014; Morrow & Torres, 2019; Tett, 2002, *inter alia*), and radical popular education (Hall et al., 2011; Jara, 2010; Manicom & Walters, 2012; Mayo, 2020) is clear. The same is true of critical and participatory research (Hall, 1981; Rappaport, 2020). It is also worth remembering that

this horizon is vital to understanding the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) whose ideas have been so influential in ALE both directly but also indirectly through work in Community of Practices and Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

The Portuguese revolution and learning in a 'school without walls'

The first article in the Special Issue 'The people need to be enlightened and taught': Revolution and popular education, is written by Carla Vilhena, Luís Mota, and António Fragoso, and deals with the Portuguese 'Carnation' revolution and takes up these themes of revolution, democracy and learning in a fascinating way. The authors describe how politics, education and social learning processes were intertwined in the first two years after the overthrow of the Estado Novo dictatorship (1974-76) They highlight four specific initiatives in this period- agrarian reform, student service, a civic action campaign and popular education- and argue that each of these initiatives was marked by extensive learning but of diverse sorts. The revolution was characterised by high levels of mobilisation and extensive self-management across society – in political institutions, workplaces and on the land. The revolution sought to transform property relations- through land and workplace occupations as well as the expropriation of businesses and the nationalisation of companies and services – but the authors tell us there was also a notably strong emphasis on transforming culture. As has happened in other revolutionary processes 'Efforts were made to blur the boundaries between training for work and for citizenship' (Vilhena et al., 2026, p. 3) linked to a democratic ethos. For a period 'the practices of self-management and collective labour functioned as both a curriculum and a learning laboratory' (p. 4). Collective planning and participation sparks learning and produces new forms of knowledge (on this topic in a range of place, see Wainwright, 2009). There was within some of the initiatives an explicitly Freirean influenced emphasis on critical dialogue and the article illuminates the ambition, broad scale and energy of these efforts most notably an attempt to build adult education system from grassroots networks linked to a novel approach to the professional training of educators.

The article documents these processes and demonstrates the importance of being able to differentiate between movement learning and popular education which were combined together as revolutionary learning process across society. It also illustrates how significant property relations and the state are in making critical sense of the role of adult education in advancing social change. The authors also deftly illustrate why these efforts foundered and reflect on how this was linked tensions between the creation of new, autonomous institutions and established political institutions and the state. The article also points to the importance of differing conceptions of democracy within this social transformation processes, as the shape of the revolution was decided, in part, in a struggle between advocates of a radical version of direct democracy and proponents of representative democracy.

Learning in a stalled democratic revolution

The second article featured in this Special Issue – 'All the different routes we walk and the knowledge they can't take away from us.' Participation, transformation, and revolution in Belarus 2020 – is by Rob Evans. It explores the learning that took place during the mass mobilisation in Belarus in 2020 in support of democracy following a rigged election and is subsequent brutal repression by the Lukashenka regime. The article is based on the 11 biographical interviews with one person Aliaksandra, a young adult from Belarus who took part in the protests and who now lives in exile, along with half a

million other Belarussians, following the state crackdown. The interviews were conducted both online and face to face and during them Aliaksandra and the author moved freely between Russian and English. The careful and sensitive rendering of this process, including in terms of analysis and transcription is methodologically innovative and is one of the many strengths of the piece. The use of biographical interviews to grasp historical events is of course not new (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 1988) but this article speaks to history whilst retaining the uniqueness of individuals thoughts and feelings in a sophisticated and original way drawing on the idea of biographicity (Alheit, & Dausien, 2000). Listening to Aliaksandra reveals that the demonstrations, civil disobedience, and informal communication across networks in 2020 was a 'hothouse for accelerated learning' (Evans, 2026, p. 12). It 'unleashed, too, undreamt-of creative potential in all sections of society' (p. 2).

The article traces how routines of thought and action – framed mainly through Raymond Williams' work – were broken and how Aliaksandra 'crossed the threshold from passive onlooker to active critic and has learnt a new habitus, that of the protester'. This occurred through the experience of protest, of unity, creativity and playfulness – a new sense of human capacity but also through the experience of state violence. As Aliaksandra puts it, this:

> It was uhm yeah a big shock to hear about some of your friends to be arrested (.) colleagues especially for a thing like this not even some protest or action just for putting leaflets on an information desk like (.) WHAT THE HELL? and uhm uhm yeah nowadays it's not like (hahahh) it's not some shock news anymore … (excerpt from Extract 1, Evans, 2026, p. 8)

The events, a crisis, led to new knowledge of self, other citizens and the state in which dominant discourse are questioned. It also involves new forms of relating self to wider collective. Aliaksandra says it created:

> such warm and nice feelings which which mustn't be surrendered to the security forces' operations still everything that we revealed in this way how we got to know our city that will stay with us no way it can be taken away from us and through this knowledge understanding we experience the link each with the other with other people who go out to meetings who also go to the courtyard concerts and the tea parties… (excerpt from Extract 4, Evans, 2026, p. 11-12)

The excerpts of Aliaksandra's interview included in the article capture the fears, hopes and learning that have changed her frames of reference and shaped who she now is. It is a remarkable document of events in Belarus. It bears witness to just how powerful movement learning can be and moves between the subjective and the social, and between habitus and reflexivity.

The Belarussian events, what might be called a stalled revolution, is significant in many ways not least that the protests share characteristics with event elsewhere. The type of resistance – non-violent civil disobedience-, the political ideals -democratic, broad and ideologically inclusive – and the spirit – creative, satirical and gentle- have recurred again and again in mass democratic protests that have taken place over the past two decades. The international Occupy movement, the early Arab Spring, Gezi, the movement of the square in Spain the events in Syntagma square in Greece, the anti-austerity protests in Brazil, the mobilisations against foreign interference in Georgia and ongoing events in Serbia can, in certain respects, be readily linked to what has occurred in Belarus (Bevins, 2023; Popović & Maksimović, 2024; Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014: Tufekci, 2017). Thinking across these waves of active democratic citizenship we also wish to highlight the different way states respond to such movements which frequently involve multi-layered

repression. This ranges from direct violence against citizens to persecution, employment dismissals, coercion, and targeted media campaigns. While these responses reveal recurrent patterns of control, they also underscore the potential for sustained civic struggle rooted in continuous, often implicit, processes of learning, both within particular movements and through the transnational circulation of experiences, practices, and repertoires of contention.

Analysing such events as social learning processes and critically reclaiming the memories of earlier revolutionary experiences, such as those in Portugal, constitutes an important dimension of ADCAL's work.

Empowerment in adult education

As we have already noted, the language of revolution is not often used in adult education research. It is important to examine different levels of mobilisation and other ways of making sense of social change. Empowerment, participation and transformation are keywords for doing so. The language of empowerment is widespread and central in ALE practice and scholarship. The idea of empowerment is tightly linked to the proposition of participation in adult education enhances social and political participation. Of particular importance is the policy and research which focuses on groups and communities which have been historically excluded from participation in education and society (Desjardins, & Rubenson; Rubenson, 2018). Adult basic education, literacy work, community education, popular education, university extension and access initiatives have, in different ways and using a range of terms, connected participation to empowerment. This has been criticised by some writers from a radical perspective (Inglis, 1997) but the fact remains this polysemic term continues to be used by liberals and radicals alike and is connected to interstitial, symbiotic and sometimes even ruptural theories of change. In this sense the term offers a space for collaboration between researchers and practitioners with different ideological orientations and is perhaps especially valuable in formal institutions of ALE which necessarily deal with a wide range of needs and desires, is often highly structured and subject to 'top down' pressures of funders, policymakers and employers.

Theorising empowerment

Julia Saam and Regina Egetenmeyer, in the third article of special issue, present an insightful, useful and analytically grounded account of the way it is employed across disciplines and offer a synthetic theoretical framework for ALE in Empowerment and Adult Education: A Multi-Level Perspective.

The primary focus of the authors is on how formal institutions of adult education can foster empowerment towards social change: 'by providing opportunities for participants to discuss and reflect on their knowledge and abilities to understand social demands and structures, overcome obstacles, and develop their world in a constructive way' (Saam & Egetenmeyer, 2026, p. 3).

Drawing on Freire (1972) as well as the capabilities approach of (Sen, 1992) and recent work applying this to adult education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), Saam and Egetenmeyer contrast ALE for empowerment to ALE for adaptation. The article frames empowerment as a nested phenomenon that requires multiple supports based on an ethic of dialogue, equality and participation. The concept of dialogue is, of course, Freirean; however, the way this is framed here in relation to social change also owes a debt to Ramon Flecha (2000) reading of dialogue and change which is less conflictual than Freire's. Building on this perspective, the authors develop a heuristic

model with seven characteristics which links the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Organised adult education depends on how individuals, learning providers, and umbrella organisations and associations are meshed together. The micro, meso, and macro are perceived as mutually dependent and intricately interwoven. The analysis highlights that empowerment cannot be achieved at any single level in isolation; rather, it emerges through ongoing dialogue and interaction across all three levels. This article is particularly valuable for demystifying the processes of empowerment. In doing so, it moves beyond placing sole responsibility on the adult educator for fostering empowerment, instead highlighting the broader context that can either enable or constrain opportunities for learning and change. Far too often, the scalability of reflexive learning for social change and the differences and interconnections between individual and collective learning are overlooked in ALE (Finnegan, 2019). This synthesis offers to both researchers and practitioners a compelling and realistic account of how adult education can effectively foster change, highlighting both the potential and complexity of empowerment in and through ALE.

Learning through participation in activism

A growing body of scholarship highlights social movements and collective action as key sites learning, where adults develop knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness through collective action, dialogue, and reflective practice. These learning processes are inseparable from collective praxis and play a central role in the formation of transformative agency, empowerment, and sustained engagement in social change (Zibechi, 2012). From this perspective, learning through social movements is not secondary to social change but constitutes a central pedagogical mechanism through which interstitial transformations (Wright, 2010) are sustained and expanded.

Learning through movements and civic associations

We know that progressive and radical movements have been important spaces of learning and knowledge production. Interest in social movement learning has increased greatly in recent years (Atta & Holst, 2023) and the fourth article in the collection – '…we scratch our heads; we look at each other... we come up with a solution and we have no idea who came up with the solution... probably all together...': A study of how adults act and learn through and from social action written by Eleni Giannakopoulou – explores informal and non-formal learning *within, for,* and *from* collective action and social movements. Grounded in a socio-cultural and dialogical perspective, the analysis highlights learning as an integral element of collective praxis rather than a by-product of activism. The article is based on interviews with eight people from four campaign/civic groups in Chalandri, in the north of Athens. The groups focus on animal rights, the environment and access to healthcare and social solidarity and with vulnerable people such as refugees and incarcerated individuals.

The researcher asked the participants about their motivations for engaging in collective actions, knowledge and skills they gained as well as changes in understanding of themselves and the world. Building on work of Griff Foley (1999) and Aziz Choudry (2015), the research indicates that activism is a powerful source of learning. It illustrates how participation in collective initiatives fosters the development of practical competencies, critical awareness, contributes to individual transformation, develops a political identity and facilitates broader processes of learning. It also makes the case that practicing solidarity increases a sense of connection. One participant's remarks capture

this theme in the article well: 'I want to connect with other people, to fight for our rights. I feel that helping others makes you stronger' (interview excerpt, Giannakopoulou, 2026, p. 7). It also confirms that activists gain, or seek to gain, practical skills, communicative and socio-political understanding (see also Atta & Holst, 2023). In relation to socio-political understanding, they note the participants learned through activism to 'understand broader socio-political realities and interpret public issues from a viewpoint beyond their immediate personal situations. This knowledge fostered a sense of civic engagement and public responsibility' (Giannakopoulou, 2026, p. 10).

They also found that critical reflection on assumptions is an important aspect of learning and link this to Mezirow (1991) highlighting the affective dimensions of this:

> Through a thematic analysis of the data collected, it became evident that the learning outcomes of our participants – whether arising from intentional or incidental learning processes – emerged through situational, socially embedded interactions and were essentially collective. Their learning experiences, intertwined with emotions such as frustration, hope, anger, and solidarity, often generated confusion, doubt, and challenges that prompted them to set aside immediate learning difficulties and begin critically reassessing prior beliefs or attitudes. (Giannakopoulou, 2026, p. 14)

From this they conclude 'overlapping processes of cognitive analysis, emotional investment, and social learning cultivate a rich, multi-dimensional learning environment' (Giannakopoulou, 2026, p. 13). Here transformation is mainly understood as cognitive and relational accompanied by the creation of new forms of collective participation.

Similar to Niesz (2022), Giannakopoulou emphasises that the educational impact of social movements extends beyond direct actors, reaching wider audiences who engage with their ideas and experiences across multiple dimensions. This underscores both the spectrum of learning generated by social movements and the novel, alternative narratives they produce. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates in adult education by illustrating how participation in social movements constitutes a key site of empowerment, critical consciousness, and sustained social change, particularly in contemporary urban struggles around housing, public space, and environmental justice.

Workplace organising, trade unions and learning for social change

Trade unions, and associated and political initiatives, have long served as vital spaces of active citizenship and learning which not only supports individual empowerment but also enables collective action, linking workplace learning to broader struggles for social justice, equity, and social transformation. Since the 1980s, we have witnessed the weakening of trade unions, a process closely aligned with broader neoliberal restructuring and union density has plummeted and unions became more service orientated with education increasing focused on skill-building. As unions were increasingly marginalised or reoriented to accommodate neoliberal agendas, their capacity to support collective learning and action diminished. This erosion of workers' organisation has been a significant contributing factor to the rise of precarious employment and the intensification of labour insecurity. Keune and Pedaci (2020) argue that the ways in which trade unions have responded to the growth of precarious employment have become an increasingly prominent focus of academic debate.

In her contribution – The role of learning and education in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers – Barbara Samaluk addresses a gap in research

on trade union strategies and adult education by examining the role of learning and education in organising young and precarious workers within the context of growing precarisation, a phenomenon that poses significant challenges to effective labour organisation. The decomposition of the working class as a clear identifiable actor in struggles for social change in many contexts has also changed adult education especially adult education for social change.

Drawing on insights from both industrial relations and adult education, her case study of Slovenia's Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP), active since 2011, illustrates how dialogical approaches to education can serve as a mechanism for social change:

> TUYP thus evolved from an experiment into an innovative hybrid trade union that has a lot of new knowledge to offer to the confederation and its affiliates on how to enter dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers and increase their general dialogical capacity towards existing and potential members. (Samaluk, 2026, p. 11)

The paper examines how class and political consciousness can be cultivated among young precarious workers and how this knowledge can be effectively transferred across the broader trade union movement: 'There is a gap in understanding how trade unions actually learn to enter dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers' (Samaluk, 2026, p. 4).

The author frames these questions within the philosophy of radical adult education; a tradition rooted in the early labour and trade union movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Kump (2012) notes, much workers' education in this tradition was explicitly designed to raise working-class political consciousness and empower individuals to organise and advocate for their rights. By situating her inquiry within this philosophical framework, the author highlights how contemporary union-based learning initiatives build on a long-standing commitment to adult education as a tool for social change and collective empowerment – a practice of freedom. Samaluk distinguishes between external trade union education, which can address emerging public labour concerns, and internal education, which focuses on learning and knowledge transfer within trade unions and their broader movements.

The study highlights that education and learning were central to the establishment and growth of TUYP, occurring through informal dialogue, formal internal and external union training, and hands-on fieldwork. Through these diverse learning processes, TUYP activists gradually developed into union leaders, acquiring the expertise, skills, and knowledge necessary to effectively engage, organise, and empower young and precarious workers. This underscores the transformative potential of union-based learning as a mechanism for social change and the cultivation of leadership within adult education contexts (see Kim & Tarlau, 2024 for a general overview): 'These findings again confirm that dialogical approaches to education can change workers' consciousness and can lead them to challenge hegemony and transform society' (Samaluk, 2026, p. 14).

The focus on economy and the workplace as a space of learning for social change in this article as well as the piece on the Carnation revolution are especially welcome as this tends to be neglected in ALE scholarship on social change.

Participating in movements and rupturing events

Anne Harley's piece – The disorienting dilemma versus the event: Adult education, social change, and the theories of Jack Mezirow and Alain Badiou – the sixth article, also reflects and poses questions on how to best understand social movement learning and how it is fostered. Rooted in her experience of working and thinking alongside the South

African shack dweller movement, Abahlali BaseMjondolo, Harley explores two approaches to social change that are quite distinct and, in some senses, conflicting and links them to both to social movement learning processes. The first is Jack Mezirow (1991, 2007) whose theory perspective transformation is extremely well known in adult education. The article reviews the debates over Mezirow's attitude to social change. Harvey, rightly, notes Mezirow was explicitly concerned with learning that supports progressive change but sees reflection on assumptions as a necessary *preliminary* step to collective action. Perspective transformation may or may not relate to social change and transformative education and learning as noted elsewhere (Finnegan, 2019, 2022) this is both Mezirow's strength and weakness. Harley links this to other writers concerned with critical reflection who are equally familiar to adult education researchers – Freire (1972) and Gramsci (1971). We could say – if we also include Dewey and feminist scholars – critical reflection in context as key to empowerment and emancipation, and to a living democracy, provide a core set of ideas across the vast majority of ALE scholarship dealing with social change.

The second theorist is Alan Badiou (2005) the French philosopher theory of the 'event' whose work has been informed by his own experience of protests and activism. It is not a learning theory and despite his profile as a philosopher he has been given very little attention in ALE. One of the main purposes of the article is to bring Badiou's theory view and 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' (Harley, 2026, p. 2). The novelty of these ideas in our context means the article is very stimulating and, to return back to a phrase used already, allows us to think 'against the grain'. Badiou has his own specific and somewhat difficult terminology to denote social reproduction and social change which Harley handles with lucidity. Badiou terms a highly structured context a *situation* – this can be on various scales could be a nation state, the capitalist society, even a specific field etc. This denotes a structured set of relations of power, and a symbolic order, which determines what is named and unnamed and what is 'counted', or not, of the multiplicity of things. Harley continues that each order is defined by a void of 'those things that are not counted' (Harley, 2026, p. 5) and that:

> At 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'. (Harley, 2026, p. 5)

And adds: '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' (p. 5).

Situations are ruptured by an 'evental situation', for instance the French revolution, which changes what counts or not. This is a way of characterising, and valuing, a form of radicality based on emergent politics which transforms the terms of reference we use. The event has an afterlife through 'fidelity' to the event, a holding onto the hope and logic of the event after it has ended. Fascinatingly, Harley draws on these ideas and her experience with Abahlali BaseMjondolo whose founding event was a blockade of a road in Durban, In this, and other events, Harley argues for the importance of a type of implacable humanism and egalitarianism. Harley brings together these values and fidelity in relation

to the philosophy of ubuhlalism developed by Abahlali BaseMjondolo which is premised 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. (Harley, 2026, p. 7)

Harley goes on to quote Badiou:

> 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 ... (Badiou, 2015, cited in Neocosmos, 2017, p. 405)

This is very different from 'of the oppressed', the uneven, hard, often long struggle against hegemony (Chalcroft, 2025), perspective transformation for social change (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Cunningham, 1998; Mezirow, 1991, etc.) or for that matter the social movement learning theory discussed above. In all of these case change occurs by through reflection on both the specific context, by producing knowledge of this situation which is agentic and through developing good sense elaborates a new way of making sense of the world. The new emerges from the old through interstital or symbiotic strategies for changes even when working towards a revolutionary horizon. In contrast Badiou is vested value in taking action rather than reflection and in activism rather than experts (including perhaps in popular and radical education as typically understood). The theory holds to the truth of hope rather than the elaborated knowledge and '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' (Feltham & Clemens, 2003, p. 6).

Harley's essay also makes a case for the limits of identitarian thinking in movements and education. She says: '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' (Harley, p. 7), and:

> … '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). (Harley, 2026, p. 7)

Bringing Badiou into view is novel and bringing him into dialogue with more established theories of change and learning in adult education is very thought-provoking indeed. It makes a case that we go beyond merely acknowledging grievances and critical perspectives, and instead actively propel social change through the process of radical imagination, hope and courage (Khasnabish, 2020) and prefigurative practice (Davis, 2012). It should be noted the essay is an attempt to create a dialogue rather than resolve the ideas into a tidy synthesis and it thoughtfully opens up questions about how we think of the temporalities of social change and the work of adult education.

A revolution without revolutionary rhetoric?: Sustainability and social change

Social change – linked to varying ways of how we understand learning in relation to participation, transformation and empowerment is now frequently connected – for self-evident reasons to sustainability. The present environmental crises are composed of many interlocking elements. Climate change, biological degradation, species extinction, and natural resource depletion are driving an increasing number of people to crave radical change which treats social justice and ecological sustainability as inextricably linked (Bookchin, 1995; Bellamy Foster, 2022; Bresnihan & Hesse, 2021). As exemplified by the current degrowth movements (Schmelzer et al., 2022), which are gaining traction in both civic and academic contexts, there is a thirst for comprehensive and profound economic, social, and cultural change. Many proponents of degrowth and decolonial movements demand that we break with modernism and capitalism (Maison, 2023). Arguably these are revolutionary movements which nevertheless choose to eschew the language of revolution. Spurred by environmental crises, these movements take a complex, holistic approach to such issues, arguing for the intertwined co-dependence of social justice and ecological sustainability which offers new ways of thinking about the temporality and goals of social transformation. Adaptation, mourning of the passing world, working in the cracks, building in the 'shell of the old world', reconnecting with indigenous forms of wisdom – these are all offered as strategies for a needed social transformation. What, if anything, does the idea of revolution have to offer in this context, and should we conceptualise revolution as rupture, process, or both (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020)? Or is the idea of revolution produced by the very same instrumental and anthropocentric logic that underpins the ecological crisis and should be abandoned? Finally, what might be the tasks of critical pedagogy (Lange, 2023) and the coordinates of a renewed popular education in the face of the socio-ecological crises?

The momentous issues are taken up in the seventh and final article in this special issue – entitled Beyond Anthropocentrism: Rethinking Adult Education for an Ecocentric and Just Future. Albertina Oliveira's contribution situates adult education and learning within civilisational crisis and the growth paradoxes of late capitalism. By developing contemplative knowledge as a concrete pedagogical pathway towards sustainability, Oliveira (2026) invites us to carefully consider critical dimensions that are easily taken for granted in ALE: What are we attending to? How do we conceptualise and inhabit time and embodiment when learning and being in the world? The practices we engage in, how we teach and learn, matter for what can be learned and for what futures are being made possible both on a personal and collective level. Moving from an onto-epistemological worldview perspective to the embedded and embodied, the contribution connects the movement imaginaries of sufficiency, conviviality and care with pedagogical practices such as indwelling, an aesthetic of silence and place-attentive work. More specifically, the contribution speaks to our call by widening what counts as knowledge in adult education and learning, and reframing participation, transformation and revolution as intertwined scales of practice. The movement horizon, here exemplified through degrowth and Eco-swaraj, furnish the potential direction, while contemplative pedagogy supplies methods and texture to what participation in change and prefiguration can look like in everyday practice.

Read this way, the contribution speaks to our prompt to ask again what was, is, and should be the role of social movements in adult education and whether critical pedagogy's political and ethical commitments remain visible. By developing contemplative pedagogy as a concrete pathway, Oliveira shows how adult education and learning can host

engagement with deep existential issues and the taken-for-granted, staying with the trouble or discomfort they stir. For us, this illustrates how the pursuing a good life beyond the constraints of modernity is inherently revolutionary, regardless of whether it is explicitly framed as revolution or not. Whether we conceive revolution as rupture, process, or both (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), the contribution illustrates how the ongoing struggle over what constitutes a good life can be made pedagogically actionable through collective experiments in attention, time and embodiment that prefigure social change in the very act of learning.

Notes

[1] There are, though, Marxist authors who have argued that we need to again begin to use the language of revolution – e.g., Paula Allman (1999), Peter McLaren (2000) and Derek Ford (2017), as well as anarchist influenced scholarship and praxis that seeks to achieve a revolution in an interstitial way (see, for example, Haworth, 2012).

[2] The fear of revolution also sparked reform to ensure revolution did not take place. Horror at the consequences of revolutions, and fear of the zeal and dogmatism of revolutionaries has been an important political and cultural thread of modernity as well from Edmund Burke, through to Hannah Arendt and onto Leszek Kołalkowski. This anti-revolutionary tradition is important in thinking through questions of social change and adult education but falls outside of the scope of this Special Issue.

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