Participation, Transformation, and Revolution

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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).

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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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'The people need to be enlightened and taught'[1]: Revolution and popular education

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Abstract

This article explores the social, educational, and participatory practices during the revolutionary period in Portugal (1974-1976), a historical moment marked by a combination of political rupture and grassroots mobilisation. By focusing on four key initiatives – agrarian reform, popular education, the MFA's Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign, and the Student Civic Service – this study sheds light on the diversity of popular educational experiences and social transformation movements of the time. It analyses how education and civic engagement were conceived and employed as tools for societal transformation. The results show that, during the revolutionary period, civil society, previously repressed under the dictatorship, played a crucial role in the democratisation of education. They also highlight the significant contribution of the popular classes and of popular education in the broader transformation of Portuguese society.

Keywords: Portuguese revolutionary process, agrarian reform, popular education, MFA's Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign, Student Civic Service

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Introduction

On April 25, 1974, the Carnation Revolution (*Revolução dos Cravos*) took place in Portugal. A group of military officers, dissatisfied with the political regime, particularly due to the prolonged colonial war (Judt, 2005; Rosas, 2020), marched on Lisbon and seized power, bringing an end to 48 years of dictatorship. The Carnation Revolution marked the collapse of the conservative and authoritarian Estado Novo (1933-1974), and the beginning of a revolutionary process known as Ongoing Revolutionary Process (*Processo Revolucionário em Curso – PREC)*.

It was a unique period in Portuguese history marked by widespread political participation of the population, particularly among the urban working and middle class, as well as the rural proletariat in the south of the country, and intense social mobilisation (Stoer, 1986), which gave rise to what Hammond (1988) refers to as a *popular power model* of revolution, one in which people were genuinely empowered through their active engagement in the popular movement. It was widely felt to be a time of living a utopia, when a significant part of the population was involved in the process of the construction of a new society, democratic and socialist (Mogarro & Pintassilgo, 2009).

The popular movements emerged to fill the political vacuum left by the downfall of the New State (*Estado Novo*) regime (Chilcote, 2010) and developed as alternatives to traditional institutions. They emphasised political rights, social justice, and the creation of a democratic space in civil society where competing demands could be openly debated rather than decided behind closed doors, and contributed, according to Marie (2017), to the solution of real problems of everyday life (e.g. housing, childcare, and education).

These revolutionary processes were far from being ideologically homogeneous. Competing political parties, international actors, and segments of the Portuguese population sought to impose their own visions for the future, attempting to shape the direction of the state and the economy (Downs, 1989).

This ideological fragmentation led to two key turning points in 1975 that would ultimately define the trajectory of the Portuguese Revolution. On March 11, a failed right-wing military coup led by General António de Spínola attempted to halt the revolutionary momentum and restore conservative control (Downs, 1989). The coup was swiftly suppressed by progressive factions within the Armed Forces Movement (*Movimento das Forças Armadas* – MFA), and its failure emboldened the revolutionary left. A wave of nationalisations, including banks, insurance firms, the steel monopoly, energy and oil interests, and transportation services, swept the country, land occupations expanded under agrarian reform, and political power increasingly shifted toward grassroots popular movements and leftist elements within the military (Chilcote, 2010; Downs, 1989; Hammond, 1988).

As the revolutionary fervour intensified, so too did internal divisions. The State transformed into a contested terrain marked by multiple social and political struggles, without any social, political, or economic bloc gaining control over it. The attempt to align the State with the proposals of the popular social movement seems to have been at the origin, at least in some sectors, of a 'dual State' (de Sousa Santos, 1990). This concept refers to the paralysis of the state apparatus on the one hand, which did not collapse with the revolution, and the emergence of new institutions on the other hand, which created opportunities for social, political and cultural experimentation (de Sousa Santos, 1990).

By November 25, tensions between military factions reached a boiling point. On one side, there were those grounded in revolutionary legitimacy, seeking to deepen the revolution's transformative goals; on the other, those aligned with electoral legitimacy**,** committed to a transition toward representative democracy. A group of paratroopers,

acting in defence of what they perceived as the revolution's true path, attempted to seize control of strategic military sites in Lisbon, fearing that the process was being co-opted. Their actions were met with swift resistance from forces backing electoral legitimacy. The insurrection was suppressed and military command was restructured to curtail the influence of revolutionary elements, 'leaving the popular movement demoralized and disoriented' (Hammond, 1988, p. 19). The defeat of the military factions grounded in revolutionary legitimacy on November 25 marked the end of the PREC's most transformative phase. It signalled the military's withdrawal from direct political influence, the establishment of a parliamentary democracy, and the transfer of power from the people to a new segment of the capitalist class – in sum, the defeat of the revolution (Hammond, 1988).

However, one element remained constant: the strategic importance attributed to education, particularly popular education, essential to the revolutionary project. Many believed that the political revolution ought to be accompanied by a cultural revolution that would enable a transformation of mentalities and the construction of a *new man*[2] (Pintassilgo, 2014). Therefore, knowledge was positioned as fundamental for the exercise of civic freedom and civic participation in the construction of the new society.

The importance attributed to education began to emerge in the 1960s and intensified in the 1970s, particularly with the Veiga Simão Reform. This comprehensive educational reform sought to democratise education. Its main objectives were to ensure universal access to schooling for all children and to promote equality of opportunity. Launched in January 1971 the reform project sparked widespread public debate, thereby contributing to a broader societal discussion on education in Portugal (Correia, 2000; Stoer, 2008).

The principles of democratisation and equal opportunities, central to the Veiga Simão Reform and requiring the abandonment of the compartmentalised policies that had prevailed until then, can be seen as a reflection of broader transformations of Portuguese educational field. These included the growing association between investment in education and economic development, as well as the increasing influence of the OECD in shaping Portuguese educational policies from the 1960s onwards (Lima, 2024; Stoer, 2008; Teodoro, 2001). At the same time, as Teodoro (2024) notes, the reform represented the most visible expression of the regime's willingness to modernise, a stance clearly reflected in the debates in the National Assembly prior to the act's approval, which were marked by the distrust of conservative sectors. This distrust, however, was not limited to regime supporters: it also extended to the opposition, who considered the reform's principles irreconcilable with the authoritarian nature of the regime (Lima, 2024). Approved on July 25, 1973, the reform was suspended a few months later following the Revolution. Nevertheless, as Lima (2024) points out, several measures related to the democratisation of education – such as vocational education, teacher training, and adult education – were subsequently implemented.

The events of March 1975 required the education sector to intensify its contribution to the construction of a socialist society (Grácio, 1981) through the participation and organisation of the popular masses. The democratisation of access and equality of opportunities became the primary task of educational policy (Teodoro, 2001). A democratising and critical ideology took shape, grounded in a political definition of education that aimed to address educational issues through its contribution to democracy. Education was seen as inseparable from the emergence of politics within the educational space. Efforts were made to blur the boundaries between training for work and for citizenship. The only criterion for defining educational justice was equality of opportunities (Correia, 2000).

In line with the political definition of education (Correia, 2000), Freire's (1997) view of learning as a social practice based on critical dialogue influenced some of the popular education experiments that we will analyse next, such as agrarian reform and the MFA cultural campaigns. The processes of 'conscientização', through which individuals become aware of and problematise their own reality and are empowered to transform it, were central during the PREC. The MFA campaigns employed a range of non-formal educational practices, including theatre, film screenings, lectures, technical workshops (in areas such as medicine, veterinary care, and infrastructure improvement) and political literacy actions. These social practices combined the dissemination of public policies, such as agrarian reform, with practical training. This created learning opportunities centred on local problem-solving and collective decision-making (de Almeida, 2007).

These popular educational initiatives created informal learning spaces where technical knowledge (e.g., agricultural techniques) was combined with civic knowledge (e.g., discussions about self-management and cooperativism). Consequently, the implementation of agrarian reform – specifically the establishment of cooperatives and experiments in self-management – took place within an educational context. Thus, the practices of self-management and collective labour functioned as both a curriculum and a learning laboratory (Almeida, 2009).

This article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social, educational and participatory practices during the revolutionary period in Portugal. By focusing on the PREC as a unique historical moment that combined political rupture with grassroots mobilisation, our main aim is to examine how education and participation were mobilised as instruments for societal transformation. To reach this aim we analyse four initiatives that reflect the revolutionary aspirations of the time: two broad-based, civil society led processes, agrarian reform and popular education, and two more structured and state-supported interventions, the Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign (*Campanha de Dinamização Cultural e Ação Cívica*) by the MFA and the Student Civic Service (*Serviço Cívico Estudantil*). The sources used for analysing these initiatives were primarily documentary (e.g., the Armed Forces Bulletin official reports of the Student Civic Service), complemented by an analysis of academic literature produced about this particular period. The article is structured into four main sections, each devoted to the description and analysis of these initiatives. In the final section (Discussion and Conclusion), we will consider those four experiences in light of the theories and practices of popular education in revolutionary settings, linking them to social change and social transformation.

Social movements for transformation in the revolutionary period

Agrarian reform

Prior to 1974, Portugal's agricultural sector lagged far behind those of most other European countries. It suffered from various inefficiencies and stark inequalities. In southern regions (especially Alentejo), latifundia occupied most of the arable land. Just 2% of farms controlled 57% of cultivated land in the south of the country (Piçarra, 2021). These properties were often underused and relied on seasonal labourers who experienced precarious conditions and limited rights (Varela & Piçarra, 2016).

The agrarian reform that followed the 25 April Revolution was a radical attempt to restructure land ownership and rural production. The movement combined rural workers' occupations from the bottom up and the provisional revolutionary government's

legislation from the top down (Rutledge, 1977). Spontaneous land occupations began in late 1974 and escalated in 1975. Many of these occupations occurred without a national legal framework and were often encouraged by local revolutionary committees and elements of the military. Examples of these include the occupations in Setúbal, Cujancas and Cabeção (Barreto, 1983). However, the most famous and politically significant of these occupations occurred when landless workers occupied the latifundium Torre Bela (owned by a Portuguese aristocrat) to create a cooperative.

By mid-1975, rural workers had occupied over one million hectares, affecting approximately 1,500 landowners (Barreto, 1983). These occupations were formalised by Decree-Law 406-A/75, which permitted the expropriation of underutilised or absentee-owned land. Decree-Law 406-B/75 then established the framework for Collective Production Units (UCPs), which became central to the reform (de Almeida, 2004). Rather than distributing plots to individuals, the Portuguese reform emphasised collective farming. Over 500 UCPs and cooperatives were formed, encompassing around 50,000 workers and covering vast areas of formerly private estates (Fonseca, 2024). These units aimed to improve productivity and employment, as well as fostering democratic participation and egalitarian management (De Carli, 2014; Fernandes, 2013). However, many of these initiatives were plagued by problems such as a lack of technical know-how, political infighting and inadequate support (Clark & O'Neill, 2024).

The reform process was deeply political. Although many occupations were indeed spontaneous, political parties soon recognised their importance. Not only did these parties support the occupants and cooperatives, they also promoted and organised them, and even directed them (Varela & Piçarra, 2016). The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) was its firmest supporter, whereas the Socialist Party (PS) and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) became increasingly reserved. This ideological clash was reflected in legislative disputes. The 1976 *Agrarian Reform Pact* represented an attempt to reconcile these differences by limiting expropriations and promoting private agriculture alongside collectives (de Almeida, 2013; Piçarra, 2021).

Following the coup on 25 November 1975, a conservative political tide took hold. Law 77/77, also known as the Law Barreto (*Lei Barreto*), allowed many landowners to reclaim their properties. Subsequent governments restricted new occupations and reduced support for UCPs. The country's access to the European Economic Community in 1986 signalled a decisive move towards private agriculture and market liberalisation, making collective structures increasingly impractical (Fonseca, 2024).

Despite its decline, the reform had a lasting impact. It disrupted feudal power structures and empowered thousands of rural workers. In municipalities such as Avis, former labourers took control of cooperatives, unions and local governments (de Almeida, 2004). However, many participants later expressed disillusionment. In hindsight, the reform is viewed as both a moment of liberation and a source of unresolved trauma (Almeida, 2007; Varela & Piçarra, 2016). Portugal's agrarian reform was an experiment in radical land redistribution, shaped by revolutionary zeal, political idealism and mass mobilisation. Although it was ultimately curtailed, it remains a symbol of rural empowerment and a vivid reminder of how the state and society can engage in transformative action. Its mixed legacy, marked by both achievement and frustration, continues to echo throughout Portugal.

Workers' struggles and popular adult education

Although the MFA initiated the transition from dictatorship, it was the collaboration between the military and civilian sectors that determined the course of the Portuguese

democratic process. Workers' popular struggles, characterised by factory occupations, the formation of workers' councils and widespread demands for economic democracy, occurred in dynamic interaction with the MFA's political project (Maxwell, 1995; Rezola, 2024). While the MFA was not a homogeneous body, it shared an anti-authoritarian ethos and, crucially, created a permissive space for civil society to organise autonomously. The military's refusal to suppress demonstrations, strikes and occupations enabled widespread grassroots mobilisation, particularly within the working class (Chilcote, 2010).

Workers across Portugal began to organise into workers' councils[3] (*comissões de trabalhadores*), taking control of their workplaces and challenging managerial authority. These councils mostly formed spontaneously, assuming responsibility for production decisions and the negotiation of labour conditions. In some cases, they even took over the overall management of factories (Hammond, 1988; Robinson, 1990). The MFA's provisional government recognised many of these councils and engaged with them in consultations, thus legitimising a form of participatory democracy. The Council of the Revolution (*Conselho da Revolução*), established by the MFA in 1975, included representatives from the workers' commissions and trade unions. This recognition marked a unique moment in which military and working-class organisations shared in the construction of political power (Varela, 2012).

Workers' movements campaigned for improved labour conditions and a broader restructuring of economic life. The demand for industrial democracy resulted in co-management arrangements and, crucially, the nationalisation of key sectors, including banking, transport, energy and heavy industry. In response to popular pressure and fears of capital flight, the MFA oversaw the nationalisation wave beginning in March 1975 (Hammond, 1988). But the MFA acted as both a catalyst and a moderator, supporting popular initiatives while attempting to maintain institutional cohesion (Cerezales, 2003).

The PREC was marked by intense social conflict, much of which was fuelled by class tensions and competing ideas about democracy. Workers staged hundreds of strikes, occupied factories and took control of production[4]. Only in the first month after the 25th of April there were 158 conflicts, with strikes or menaces of strikes (Canário, 2008). Varela and Alcântara (2014) reports that in the six months following the revolution, over 1,000 labour disputes occurred, many of which were led by independent workers' commissions. The MFA's response to these struggles was nuanced. While it tolerated and sometimes facilitated workers' occupations, it also sought to contain anarchic tendencies and avoid destabilisation. This balancing act was evident during the coup on 11 March 1975. The coup attempt galvanised the revolutionary left, prompting mass mobilisations and leading the MFA to align more explicitly with the workers' movement. The subsequent period, sometimes referred to as the hot summer (*Verão Quente*) of 1975, saw the peak of revolutionary activity, including large-scale occupations, street assemblies and increased nationalisations (Rezola, 2024; de Sousa Santos, 1985).

During this period, political parties, particularly the PCP and the PS, played dual roles, facilitating and constraining grassroots activism. While the PCP supported the formation of workers' councils, it aimed to centralise their activities within a broader party-led strategy. Wary of leftist radicalism, the PS sought to channel the revolution into parliamentary forms (Maxwell, 1995). The MFA, through the Council of the Revolution and other bodies, attempted to mediate between these forces. In doing so, it often found itself torn between institutional stability and popular radicalism. This dual role, balancing grassroots demands with national governance, helped to preserve the democratic trajectory of the revolution, albeit at the expense of deeper socialist transformations (Chilcote, 2010).

The collaboration between the MFA and civil society transcended the workplace. In urban areas on the outskirts of cities, neighbourhood movements organised around housing rights, sanitation, and infrastructure. Residents' commissions occupied empty housing, demanded rent reductions and planned urban improvements, emphasising participatory decision-making and collective action (Canário, 2014).

The original adult education initiatives of the 1974–76 period emerged in this environment of workers' struggles and everyday conflicts between different revolutionary strategies. There were attempts to build a participatory democracy, but above all there was a widespread enthusiasm and sense of urgency to destroy all signs of the dictatorship and build a new, free country. In other words, people felt it was necessary to abandon the old educational structures and reshape the entire educational system (Teodoro, 1978). During this revolutionary process, the popular classes took over the democratisation of education (Stoer, 1982).

The PREC brought about a complete change to the former landscape of adult education. The dictatorship regime limited adult education to timid literacy campaigns in the 1950s and '60s which served more as mechanisms of ideological control than tools for empowerment (Stoer & Dale, 1987). The basic idea that guided adult education after the revolution was to transform the usual relationship between the state and its citizens, turning it upside down. From then on, the administration would support the hundreds of groups already engaged in diverse popular actions, serving the grassroots movements. Adult education was intended to emerge spontaneously from grassroots initiatives, often in response to immediate social needs, and guided by local self-determination. It was perhaps possible for a system of adult education to evolve in this way (Melo & Benavente, 1978).

The Directorate-General for Permanent Education (DGEP) was a state agency that had existed since 1973. Following the revolution, Alberto Melo took charge of the agency, which was staffed by educators who shared radical pedagogical ideals. The DGEP created the legal status of *popular education association* and a simplified process for the legal registration of grassroots groups. This legal instrument provided informal groups with a fast-track procedure to become officially recognised, which granted these associations access to public funding and technical support, and legitimacy in their interactions with local authorities and communities. In short, the law was a cornerstone of the democratisation of adult education (Melo & Benavente, 1978).

Popular education associations were involved in a variety of activities during this period, ranging from literacy, or vocational training, to theatre, oral history and political education. They deployed culture as a central element in their action Such initiatives employed participatory methods such as group discussions, photo narratives, and local storytelling, focusing on themes such as land ownership and class struggle. These methods were inspired by Freire's philosophy (1965, 1997), not just in literacy work. The educational process began with the realities experienced by learners and unfolded through dialogue, reflection, and action. The aim was not merely to teach people to read and write, but also to enable them to critically analyse their social conditions and organise collectively for change.

The DGEP supported the popular education associations providing bursaries for people in local communities to develop diverse activities or offering technical support. The DGEP also built mobile units that travelled the country to connect with, and support, these associations (Melo & Benavente, 1978). According to the same authors, these local nuclei gradually evolved into a system capable of articulating with professional training, formal schooling and civic participation. Popular adult education was literally co-produced by communities and culture was an important dimension of its action.

In July 1976, around 500 popular education associations were in close contact with the DGEP. It is also important to note that many other informal groups were active at this time. Norbeck (1983) estimates that 700 popular education associations were operating within a variety of themes, ranging from literacy to community-based work in collaboration with social services and training organisations.

The importance of this work lies in the fact that these local group-based dynamics represented a process of liberation that fostered autonomy rather than dependency in the population (Melo & Benavente, 1978). It would transform adult education into a platform for participatory democracy.

It seemed that the hope of establishing a grassroots system of adult education inspired by popular education was about to become a reality. However, history took a different turn. The events of 25 November 1975 marked the end of the revolutionary period and signalled the beginning of the establishment of representative democracy, as defended by most political parties. The first free elections in 1975, with a turnout of over 90%, elected a Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting and approving a new constitution. This paved the way to the reconstruction of a capitalist state, and the first constitutional government marked the end of the period of radical educational reforms (Stoer & Dale, 1999), resulting in a rapid cut in revolutionary policies. Those associated with popular education were dismissed and the DGEP was left without qualified personnel, resulting in popular education being marginalised (Silva, 1990). All its activities came to a standstill a couple of years later (M. J. Gonçalves, 1978). It became clear that popular education would not be the foundation of the Portuguese adult education system, despite what some had hoped.

The 'Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign' by the MFA

One of the defining traits of the Portuguese revolutionary process was the belief that political change could not be separated from cultural transformation (Pintassilgo, 2014). The *Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign*, organised by MFA, embodied this principle. Designed to bring the revolution to rural areas and foster civic and political awareness, the campaign represented a key step in aligning cultural work with broader goals of social justice and participatory democracy (Stoer, 1986). It took place between October 1974 and February 1975, with some local extensions continuing until August of that year (Almeida, 2008).

According to Almeida (2008), the campaign must be understood in the context of the MFA Programme. As Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves noted in an interview, the military were already experienced in this type of engagement during the colonial war. These campaigns aimed to gain the trust of local populations and were now redirected to serve the Portuguese people:

> The military were used to working, during the war, on psychosocial campaigns aimed at winning over the local populations. We thought it would be easier in Portugal. I remember Salgueiro Maia saying: 'Give me bricks and the necessary materials, and we'll go work in the villages'. (Teodoro, 2002, p. 133)

The campaign had both political and cultural objectives. On the political front, it sought to stimulate participation by disseminating the MFA's programme and encouraging public debate about the country's future. Culturally, it aimed to support the creation of a national cultural network in collaboration with cultural associations and state institutions, contributing to cultural decentralisation and promoting access to culture outside urban

centres (Almeida, 2008). Its overarching goal was to foster civic engagement and support the construction of a democratic society (Dinamização Cultural, 1974).

As Pintassilgo (2014) argues, the campaign exemplified the deep interconnection between cultural and political revolution This vision is powerfully expressed in an editorial from the MFA Bulletin:

> The regime established in 1926 closed schools and reduced the length of schooling. A rise in the cultural level of the population would inevitably imply change, and that was not what was intended. But it was impossible to keep a country in obscurantism indefinitely, and that is why April 25th happened: the victory of an entire people who truly wanted change. However, this was only the first battle – and perhaps even the easiest. Many more will have to be fought before we reach the goal we have set ourselves: the establishment of democracy in Portugal. And that means that we must all take part in the battle for awareness and information. Culture cannot be imposed: culture is born from the people. It is in the daily struggle that culture is created. Bringing to the people what belongs to the people is the task we now undertake with the launch of the Campaign for Cultural Dynamisation. (Editorial, 1974, p. 1)

The campaign focused primarily on rural and inland regions of northern and central Portugal. It followed an itinerant model, combining 'clarification sessions[5]' with cultural activities – including film screenings, theatre performances, and concerts[6] – used as platforms to initiate political discussions (Oliveira, 2004; Almeida, 2008). These events were complemented by local development projects, led primarily by military personnel and occasionally supported by intellectuals, artists, and cultural or technical collectives who viewed the campaign as an opportunity to continue their work (Almeida, 2008).

The campaign's inspiration in the Cuban post-revolutionary literacy movement complicated its adaptation to the Portuguese context. From the outset, two mobilising currents coexisted within the campaign: the 'literacy' current and the 'popular power' current. These perspectives were never fully integrated due to the campaign's early termination. The political takeover by parties and the subsequent loss of influence by the MFA marked the end of the revolutionary mobilisation process, of which the cessation of the *Cultural Dynamization Campaign* was only one expression (Stoer, 1986).

Student Civic Service

The inability to hold final examinations in the 1973/74 academic year, due to the revolution, led to the automatic admission of students who had completed secondary education into universities. As a result, the 1974/75 cohort included far more students than the universities were prepared to accommodate.

> All of a sudden, around 25,000 students appeared (their exact number was never known…) applying for higher education. At the same time, the universities were severely weakened by the removal of some of their best professors. Moreover, the long-standing 'school explosion' had already made the facilities of these institutions increasingly inadequate. (Gomes, 1976, p. 280)

In response to this crisis, the government decided to suspend new admissions to higher education institutions (Maxwell, 1995). This raised an urgent question: what should be done with the thousands of young people who no longer had access to university (Oliveira, 2004)?

As a temporary solution, the Student Civic Service was established through Decree-Law no. 123/75, issued on May 30, 1975, after an extensive and prolonged debate within

the Council of Ministers. Aimed at students who had completed secondary education the previous year, it instituted a 'zero year' before university entry. This initiative emerged alongside other popular education programs, such as the *Cultural Dynamization and Civic Action Campaign*.

In addition to addressing the higher education crisis, the *Student Civic Service* sought to promote closer links between intellectual and manual labour, break the isolation of schools from real life, support the development of social infrastructures, and improve living conditions in local communities (Introdução, n.d.). It challenged the usual separation between school and society, as it is clear from the Student Civic Service Information Bulletin:

> Our objective is to efficiently and meaningfully launch a Student Civic Service that will, on the one hand, enable students to actively and genuinely engage with the environment in which they live – with the culture of our People, the culture of the Neighbourhood, the Factory, and the Countryside; and, on the other hand, allow students to gain a deep understanding of the social problems of the country in which they live. In short, it aims to allow students to enrich themselves through participation in, and transformation of, society in practice. (Introdução, n.d., p. 1)

Data from the 1975/76 academic year offer valuable insight on some results (Serviço Cívico Estudantil, 1976). A total of approximately 12,000 students were engaged in a wide range of community-based initiatives aimed at social transformation and civic participation. Activities included health education (2,500 students), social security support (2,000), and complementary educational initiatives such as managing school libraries and organising leisure activities for youth (2,400). Significant numbers also participated in sports-based community engagement (1,400) and cultural activities (1,500), reflecting a broad understanding of education as a cultural and social process. Other efforts focused on literacy campaigns (759), work in agriculture, forestry, and livestock, including fire prevention and vaccination campaigns (400), and support for agricultural cooperatives and collective production units, where tasks often integrated literacy, health education, and children's recreational activities (150). Additionally, 900 students took part in miscellaneous actions, such as public health surveys, hygienic-sanitary campaigns, and audio-visual equipment inventories. These figures show the multidimensional nature of the Student Civic Service and its commitment to linking education with practical, socially relevant engagement.

However, the program was not without controversy. It faced criticism from various sectors of Portuguese society. Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, who served as Minister of Education from July to November 1974, summarised some of the criticisms that argued that the *Student Civic Service* would demobilise the youth, distancing them from schools. It was seen as a disguised way of accessing cheap labour, exacerbating the growing unemployment in Portugal, delaying the training of the technicians and scientists the country so desperately needed, and maintaining an elitist university system reserved for only a few (Teodoro, 2002). On June 17, 1977, the *Student Civic Service* came to an end, being replaced by a foundation year (*Ano Propedêutico*) at the end of secondary school.

With the dismantling of the *Student Civic Service*, it was abandoned the revolutionary ideal of a 'school without walls', deeply embedded in and responsive to society. What followed was a reassertion of traditional educational boundaries, disconnecting the students from the lived realities and struggles of the Portuguese people.

Discussion

The concept and social practices of popular education are undoubtedly polysemic. Not only are they very old – one could argue that Condorcet was one of its promoters (Cáceres, 1964) – but they were also influenced by the different geographies in which they emerged, along with the various socio-political conditions that gave them their distinctive features. Traditional definitions can work well only to begin this discussion, such as the one by Guereña et al. (1994): a set of processes aimed at educating the popular or dominated classes developed outside or in parallel with school processes. However, the analysis provided by historical revisions reveals wider possibilities. In one such revision, Tiana Ferrer (2011) argues that popular education is not related to the different purposes of education (such as instruction, self-education or ideological or political commitment) nor to the level or age of the people involved, but rather to their social origins and position. From this perspective, popular education focuses on educational activities for or by the lower classes of society, considering their participation to be the defining feature of such activities.

Accordingly, some of the initiatives we analysed, such as the MFA campaigns and the students' civic service, can clearly be labelled as popular education. However, the remaining examples we presented, such as the popular education of the DGEP, workers' struggles and agrarian reform, are more specifically directed towards social transformation, apart from the positionality of the participants. They aimed to effect deep and wide-reaching social change. The majority of popular education concepts and practices do work in traditional spaces and times. However, an analysis of PREC can only be effective when considering similar revolutionary contexts, such as those in Latin America. Kane (2010) argues that popular education in Latin America has evolved through close dialogue with grassroots social movements, drawing on the work of Freire (1997) and embodying the core values of critical consciousness, collective empowerment and praxis. Its educational principles extend beyond the mere acquisition of literacy and skills in contexts characterised by political agency, democratic participation and social transformation.

Thus, we are presenting the Portuguese case as an example of popular education in line with traditions where education is integrated with political empowerment, collective learning and action in large-scale political contexts, as demonstrated by Kane (2010). In this sense, we consider all the experiences described and analysed above to be about popular education and popular struggles aimed at achieving two main things: destroying the structures and processes of the dictatorship regime and rebuilding a free and democratic country. The strong social popular movements that emerged after the 25th April coup d'état were, as argued by Canário (2008), both the cause and effect of a temporary suspension of the power exercised by employers and the repressive power of the state, thanks to the neutralisation of the political police and militarised forces and the fragmentation of military power – and, we add, also thanks to be the role of the MFA.

This primarily allowed the 2 years that the PREC lasted to be maybe the freest period of recent Portuguese history (Canário, 2014), in which huge numbers of people aggregated and collectively acted in a number of different stages to force deep transformation. These actions and experiences were no unified as the revolution lacked *one* direction. This made of PREC a battlefield between different revolutionary strategies, so much as a battlefield to eliminate the dictatorship from the collective life. In this context the PREC was an important counter-hegemonic period, in which counter-hegemonic practices emerged.

For Peter Mayo (1999, 2015), counter-hegemony is understood within Antonio Gramsci's framework of cultural hegemony, where dominant groups secure consent through coercion, but also by shaping common sense, values, and worldviews. Counter-hegemony, then, is the process of constructing alternative forms of knowledge, culture, and practice that contest this dominant worldview and open spaces for emancipatory social transformation (Mayo, 1999). In a critical pedagogy perspective, counter-hegemonic practices emerge through education and collective struggle. Adult education, popular education, and community learning (all of which appeared above in our text) become ideal terrains for counter-hegemony because they empower people to question dominant ideologies and imagine alternative futures – and this is in our opinion the primary essence of PREC. Additionally all the grassroots movements that we described often act as 'organic intellectuals' in Gramsci's sense, generating knowledge from below and challenging hegemony (Mayo, 2015). People generated new knowledge when they imagined adult education as being built from the hundreds of groups that were involved in it. They also generated new knowledge when they joined commissions that dismissed the management bodies of hundreds of enterprises and demanded fairer labour conditions. They generated new knowledge, too, when they set up hundreds of cooperatives (under the agrarian reform movements or outside them) and institutions, and when they self-managed them.

There are multiple reasons why the work of Paulo Freire is important to the discussion of our article, not least because of his radical stance on popular education within social movements, a stance he maintained throughout his life and work. First, Freire (1997) showed clearly that education *is* a political act. We believe we have shown the deep political commitment and the political struggles that went on during the PREC. Second, Freire (1997) believed in people's emancipation by liberating themselves and their oppressors and also believing that liberating education could be crucial in driving social transformation dynamics. Key in this issue is that ownership of the pedagogy of the oppressed belongs to the people and not to educators. And in fact, our text shows that popular classes were in the centre of the experiences we analysed.

Finally, Freire gave centrality to class and class struggle (Crowther & Martin, 2018) as he was aware of the connections between social class and structural factors. Class struggle was indeed key and clear during PREC as the enemies of the 'working masses' was well identified: the bourgeoisie, the employers, the capitalists. These were confronted because they were clearly identified with the dictatorship regime and its power structure. In Freirean terms, this involved rejecting authoritarian approaches and creating new spaces and processes in which the oppressors could become cocreators in the liberation processes (Freire, 1997).

'Pedagogy in process' was a construction deeply embedded in Freire's thinking. Although he did not use the exact term in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire employed it later in *Pedagogy of Hope*. In both texts (Freire, 1992, 1997), he described and analysed a pedagogy that is always in motion, dialogical, unfinished, and co-constructed, both in historical practice and social transformation. This is a process of liberation that is built with the oppressed and emerges from their struggles, developing as a praxis. Therefore, when analysed globally, the PREC period was a Freirian pedagogy in process that educates towards liberation.

There is no doubt that Freire turned out to be central after the Portuguese revolution. He inspired many Portuguese educators following the 25th of April 1974, a 'period of popular education, greatly influenced by the ideas and practices of Paulo Freire' (Canário, 2013, pp. 56-57). The training of adult educators focused on Paulo Freire, and his importance has endured over the decades, although the reasons for this may have changed.

It is important to discuss particular aspects of the experiences we described earlier. We already showed that the agrarian reform was an experiment in radical land redistribution supported by a strong mass mobilisation. As other forms of social participation during PREC, it was a vivid combat contested by many and supported by others – a typical counter-hegemonic, radical practice. Even if it proved impossible to maintain under neoliberal times that elected private sectors as dominant, it shows that state and society *can* engage into transformation action (Varela & Piçarra, 2016). As to the popular struggles in the context of the work world, they have originated new power relations inside enterprises, and new autonomous bodies of workers whom, on some cases, will lead production processes in a self-management regime (Canário, 2008). As this author further argues, worker's commissions led occupation processes that challenged the prevailing principles of both property ownership and traditional institutional power (the Church, Army, etc.). Numerous companies came under the direct control of elected committees, within a framework of workers' direct democracy. Our article shows a struggle for social transformation that represents an intense process of collective learning. It also 'helps to dispel the illusion that social emancipation can be ensured by educational policies and practices originating in the sphere of the State' (Canário, 2008, p. 34).

The Cultural Dynamization Campaign, organised by the MFA and the Students' Civic Service, shared socialist values and committed to grassroots political and cultural transformation (Oliveira, 2004). Both had a non-formal and informal educational focus within the context of public service. It is adequate to reflect on the meaning of campaign, which was particularly visible in the MFA experience. Literacy campaigns, particularly in revolutionary contexts, have often been framed as emancipatory projects aimed at eradicating illiteracy and fostering popular participation. Yet Paulo Freire warn against the limitations of the very notion of campaigns. He criticised educational practices that operate as one-way 'extensions' of knowledge, arguing that such initiatives often become forms of 'cultural invasion'. Extension presupposes that the technicians extend their knowledge to those considered ignorant, whereas genuine education must be dialogical, based on communication and co-creation of meaning (Freire, 1985). Campaigns risk reproducing this model, treating learners as passive recipients rather than subjects of their own liberation. As mentioned previously, the MFA was criticised for its cultural campaign, despite the intention being to encourage open discussion with the people. However, these reflections on campaigns were also important within the DGEP, which in an initial phase and after collective reflection, dismissed the idea of promoting campaigns during the PREC.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, it is important to address a central question: what changes did the PREC bring to Portuguese society? The period in question was so rich and complex that our article only covers a very small part of it, so we can only provide partial answers to this question.

Firstly, during this period, Portugal witnessed what Stoer (1986) termed the 'renaissance of civil society', characterised by the growth and renewal of civil society institutions. Examples include neighbourhood commissions, free press, professional associations, workers' councils, parents' associations and trade unions. Given that the dictatorship lasted for 48 years, this was a significant transformation. Moreover, this happened spontaneously through the actions of the people, including those involved in popular education, and it was a crucial legacy for the future of Portuguese society.

Secondly, it has been observed in other revolutionary processes that discourses around democratisation often lead to the depoliticisation of education. However, Correia (2000) notes that in Portugal, framing educational issues around democratisation actually intensified their politicisation. During the revolutionary period, education was configured and assumed as a political act and this allowed the reborning of education in Portugal. Popular education initiatives inspired or aligned with Paulo Freire thought and framed by broader cultural and political objectives became an important contribution to democracy. These initiatives aimed to foster critical consciousness and civic engagement, thereby contributing to the construction of a new society.

Thirdly, the revolutionary process in Portugal was very broad and cannot be analysed using concepts of popular education that are much more tailored to institutionalised and stable settings. The Portuguese case aligns with broader movements that emerged following decolonisation and democratisation, particularly in Latin America, where popular education was employed to promote liberation theology, land reform, and participatory governance (Torres, 1990). Popular education during the PREC was made of a diverse set of collective actions (many of them spontaneous) leaded by the working class, closely tied to clear aims of social change processes. In this sense, education and popular education contributed deeply to the transformation of Portuguese society. The PREC can be seen as a 'pedagogy in process', in which the oppressed liberated from a long-lasting period of oppression in which they were voiceless.

Fourthly, the revolutionary processes represented a unique form of democratisation. Many people contributed to establishing democracy in Portugal. However, the contribution of popular education processes, experiences and working-class struggles cannot be erased from history. The fact that popular education gradually moved to the margins after 1976 does not diminish its value. Furthermore, popular education did not disappear. It simply transformed into something else, though this development cannot be analysed in this text.

In conclusion, we are certain that the PREC was a crucial source of transformation for our country, which remains understudied. Perhaps this article will encourage other researchers to delve deeper into the subject.

Notes

1 This statement was made by the Prime Minister of the 2nd Provisional Government, Coronel Vasco Gonçalves, in his inaugural speech on July 18, 1974 (V. Gonçalves, 1974).

2 As in the original.

3 Workers' councils still exist today. Elected by workers in a specific enterprise, institution or organisation, they have a wide range of legally recognised rights and function as a direct means of negotiating with employers. For example, workers' councils have the right to demand all types of management and organisational data from employers, and they have the right to hold a monthly meeting with them. This explains why they are so popular in Portugal today.

4 The number of daily events during the PREC period was amazingly high. The historic chronology of that period is an extensive one. As an example, it follows some events of one single day, the 6th of May 1974, only two weeks after the April 25 coup (Rodrigues, 1994): 'A communiqué from the Junta condemns meetings in companies during working hours, the expulsion of people with official responsibilities and attacks on the hierarchy. In a statement, the PCP defends its entry into the Provisional Government, alongside other democratic forces. It calls for the people to unite with the MFA, condemns right-wing opportunism and left-wing adventurism, and the occupations of parish councils and town halls. An MRPP demonstration brings together 500 people in Lisbon. At TAP, a general assembly of workers nominates three of their delegates to sit on the company's Board of Directors with three others nominated by the Junta and demands the opening of a process leading to self-management. General assembly of metalworkers in Porto and Matosinhos. Steelworkers threaten to strike; management and employees offer to act as intermediaries with Champalimaud.

Start of the struggle at Timex and election of the workers' committee. General assemblies of miners, hospital workers in Coimbra, radio and television workers in Porto, gas and electricity workers in Porto, TLP workers in Lisbon and Bragança, etc. Fishermen in Matosinhos return to the sea after four days on strike. Assembly of 3,000 railway workers decides to dismiss the management and demand the removal of those connected to the dictatorship regime'.

5 There is no good translation of the Portuguese expression *sessões de esclarecimento* into English. These are sessions where a particular topic is discussed and clarified – more than just an information session. This means that everyone can ask questions and contribute to reach a common understanding of the theme.

6 Many artists were persecuted and exiled during the dictatorship. The contributions of artists and artistic movements to the PREC were so significant that they could fill several articles themselves. This is particularly evident in music. Musicians and composers such as Zeca Afonso, José Mário Branco, Sérgio Godinho, Fausto, Francisco Fanhais and Adriano Correia de Oliveira used music based on popular culture to create new compositions for the working classes and their struggles. José Mário Branco and others formed the so-called Cultural Action Group, which composed collectively and, during the PREC, performed at strikes, demonstrations, occupations and in factories. The same thing happened in theatre. Companies such as *Comuna* and *Teatro do Mundo* were dedicated to intervention theatre with very similar purposes. Arts and cultural intervention were indeed an important element that made a huge contribution to the revolutionary process.

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‘All the different routes we walk and the knowledge they can’t take away from us.’ Participation, transformation, and revolution in Belarus 2020

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Abstract

The falsification of the results of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus produced a movement of peaceful civil disobedience and resistance. Civil activism furthered radical change embracing broad democratic participation and created new political subjects. Biographical interviews conducted with Aliaksandra, a young Belarusian adult, look at the learning situation of the individual and open a space in which the search for individual meaning-making in times of biographical transition can be heard. The interviews showcase interactions in time and space between an individual and her wider out-of-frame interactions, and on the effects of social and political conflict and crisis on her biographical narrative. The concept of ‘biographicity’ is employed to describe the dynamics of ongoing biographical learning, and Raymond Williams’ understanding of the processes of social transformation provides the theoretical backdrop of the transformation of lived lives in this paper.

Keywords: Belarus 2020, biographical narrative, biographical resources and biographicity, transgression and agency

A landlocked revolution

> ‘The most difficult thing to get hold of […] is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the way in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living’ (Williams, 1965, p. 63).

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> ‘Die Mühen der Gebirge haben wir hinter uns, vor uns liegen die Mühen der Ebenen’ [The efforts of the mountains are behind us, the efforts of the plains lie ahead] (Brecht, 1967, Vol. 10, p. 960; author’s own translation).

The landlocked Republic of Belarus, jammed between Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic states and the Russian Federation, briefly independent in 1918 and again 1991-1994, saw in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, a summer of hope and mass self-organisation mobilising hundreds of thousands of people across that country (for a resumé of events before the 2020 revolution, see Marples, 2021). The then presidential incumbent of 26 years, Aliaksandr Lukashenka[1] (meanwhile 31 years in power) was defeated roundly at the polls by the ‘accidental candidate’[2] Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Golos, 2020), but he claimed victory, nevertheless. The falsification of the results of the election produced a powerful groundswell of peaceful civil disobedience and resistance (see Deikalo, 2025). The movement of citizen protest unleashed, too, undreamt-of creative potential in all sections of society. Self-organisation, local mobilisation and grassroots solidarity dramatically challenged the brute force employed by repressive state organs and responded with forms of guerilla action – light-hearted and satirical, emotional, dramatic, and politically determined.[3] The growth of civil opposition led to a discovery of the possibility of re-reading the local, national and international world for millions of Belarusians. Civil activism in the streets, community action in the neighbourhood courtyards of high-rise estates across the country, and mutual help and organisation through social media furthered a search for radical change that embraced broad democratic participation, inclusivity and sustainability for a local, regional and transregional future in Europe. Street-wide action coupled with ever-maturer exploitation of social media (see Greene, 2022; Rudnik, 2023) furthered awareness, too, of Belarus’ place in, and contribution to, wider geo-political, constitutional-juridical and cultural-historical contexts. This led to a radically new interest in Belarusian language and culture, education and national identity (Bekus, 2021b; Bekus & Gabowitsch, 2021; Razor, 2020).

Estimates put the participation in street protests in 2020 at one in five of a population of 9 million (Astapenia, 2020). A plethora of initiatives arose – solidarity and aid for victims of violence, aid in all forms for prisoners and their families, human rights groups, cultural and sports solidarity initiatives, assistance for strikers, students, and ‘relocators’, help for volunteers and veterans of the Russia-Ukraine war, and assistance in arranging clandestine evacuation out of Belarus (BySol, 2025). In addition, countless telegram-chats based in local neighbourhood courtyards and the telegram canals and online newspapers like NEXTA (NEXTALive, 2021) and TUT.BY, renamed *zerkalo* (zerkalo, 2025; *zerkalo* means ‘mirror’ in Russian) in Polish exile after being closed down in 2021, flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the 2020 elections. These and many more initiatives functioned as the web sustaining a growing civil society and at the same time as a show of strength, working as a ‘horizontal watchdog’ over the Lukashenka regime (Shparaga, 2021, p. 156).

Every aspect of this peaceful citizens’ revolution was systematically and brutally suppressed, beginning from ‘at least May 2020’ and with increasing intensity from November 2020 (ICC, 2024). The balance is dramatic: thousands have passed through detention and prison to date, of whom 7,116 recognised as political sentences (Viasna96, 2025a); in July 2025 1,164 individuals were currently recognised by the human rights organisation Viasna96 as political prisoners (Viasna96, 2025b); NGOs, news media, independent trade unions, businesses, and artists were forced into exile abroad (see PEN-Belarus, 2025); approximately 500,000 citizens have left the country and have essentially been deprived of the basic right to return home; the education system from kindergarten

to university has been militarised; the constitution has been rewritten to make a repetition of 2020 impossible; the period since 2020 has seen a tightening of civil, economic and military ties with the Russian Federation (see GIEB, 2025; Muiznieks, 2025; Vustseu et al., 2024).

Collecting biographical narratives from a revolution gained and lost

Since October 2020 I have been engaged in what I choose to call a long biographical conversation involving interviews, self-recorded video and audio accounts, written mails and, to date, two face to face talks in her place of exile with one young Belarusian professional – Aliaksandra – who was heavily involved in the social protests of 2020 and who was subsequently forced to 'relocate' at the end of that year to Poland. In October 2020 I made contact with Aliaksandra in Minsk through another Belarusian, Mara (name altered), an old friend of hers, with whom I had been conducting a series of Zoom-interviews on her Covid-19 experiences in Frankfurt and Minsk. Aliaksandra volunteered to communicate with me, an individual outside Belarus vouched for by Mara, through voice-recorded accounts, following prompts and questions I put to her via email.

The distance-interview or distance narrative via Zoom or other applications that the COVID-19 lockdown had made necessary and which I used to interview a number of individuals around Europe, was in 2020 a new method for me. In Aliaksandra's case, given that we had never met and could not realistically meet at all, it came as a highly practical solution. It was not, however, without a mixture of trepidation and curiosity that I proposed these formats at the start. I saw these as a form of intimate distance-interview of an essentially auto/biographical narrative type (see Szenajch, 2021). Most speakers seemed to find the recordings reassuring, in that they could, of course, delete or not send, as they desired. The first audio narratives from most participants were brief, becoming longer as confidence grew. Aliaksandra's audio narratives were from the start usually around 60 minutes long. Joint video dialogues, via Zoom (and some WhatsApp) were later added to the repertoire of research methods, thus enriching the interview corpus even more through the addition of video interaction and a very real – and obviously important – sense of co-construction and co-narration. As a rule, I would communicate my reactions, thoughts or ulterior questions via email shortly after each audio or video contact (see Evans, 2022).

What the narratives can tell

Aliaksandra's narratives focus on her experiences of the 2020 movement for democracy in Belarus, her re-assumption of civil protest in Polish exile and her acceptance of the permanence of exile. Since February 2022 they have dealt with the problems created for all Belarusian activists by Belarusian state complicity in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, her involvement in volunteer work with Ukrainian children, and the everyday life of a foreigner in constant need of documenting her basic rights to stay and work and travel.

The biographical interviews – unstructured interactive interviews held online – and Aliaksandra's own spoken accounts span an arc from reflections about her learning trajectory to complex and potentially threatening moments of political, social, and emotional dislocation. What we hear are Aliaksandra's evolving discourses of learning, which Alheit sees as produced via the 'ability of individuals to put themselves in a reflective relationship to their own experience process, to perceive their own learning

processes [and] enter into a discourse with others (and with oneself) about one's own experiences' (Alheit, 2022, p. 12).
The learning 'work' hearable in biographical narratives like Aliaksandra's involve:

- multi-layered interactions in time and space between individual subjects, their wider out-of-frame interaction with their respective social worlds, and the effects of transition and crisis on biographical narratives (see Alheit, 2018)
- the changes imposed by crisis on narrators' own and on others' words, on their narrative resources, threatening the language hitherto used to describe themselves and the world, creating the need to 'translate' themselves (Butler, 2012; Wierzbicka, 2003)
- the relationships the narrators affirm or deny to formerly recognised groups or to recognised values or characteristics, identities or discourses, be they political, affective, linguistic (De Fina et al., 2006; Löw, 2001).

Research interview respondents like Aliaksandra provide insight in their narratives into the significance of critical change processes for their individual learning, and crucially for their learning with others. In so doing, I argue here, they can be heard building own discourses of learning, in which acceptance of, and resistance to, the dominant discourses of institutions and civil society are worked out in the interdiscursive layering of interaction with (a) the own told narrative, (b) with the researcher agenda and (c) in the all-important implicit dialogue with those significant others whose voices and narratives give expression to the complexity and transacted meanings of individual and group learning contexts. Aliaksandra brings to her talk in conversation with me (and implicitly with herself and others) a personal history, a family history, a history of learning and a history of life-choices, to name but a handful of the critical spaces and moments of time unfolding as she speaks.

Dramatic situations such as those facing Aliaksandra on the streets of Minsk in 2020 do not infallibly transform a person's personal narrative. The life world, understood as the 'unbefragte Boden aller Gegebenheiten [unquestioned foundation of everything]' (Schutz & Luckmann, 1979, as cited in Habermas, 1987, p. 199), or again, the profoundly embodied 'manière durable de se tenir, de parler, de marcher, et, par là, de sentir et de penser [lasting manner of behaving, speaking, of walking, and thus, of feeling and thinking]' (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 117) of slowly acquired habitus exercises an enormous influence on personal learning – up to a point. Raymond Williams, considering the generations who emerged from the war years, years of incorporation in fixed roles and assigned duties and behaviours, pointed out the deep penetration of identification processes in the material lives of individuals; the rules of society, he concluded, 'run very deep'. The environment the rules dictate, Williams argues, shapes us, but we can also change it (Williams, 1965). Challenging these lived rules in biographical interview talk – as Aliaksandra challenges deep-seated, lived rules of obedience, impotence and apathy - may be heard in the difficulty and uncertainty she has of verbalising the meaning of the routine 'here' and 'now' when the here and now fall apart in crisis (Alheit, 1983, 1992).

This paper will explore the possibility of identifying the crucial relationship between revolution and narration, and of investigating the disruption of the life story which takes place as individual learning biographies are swept along by larger social events. Necessarily fragile or hearably broken biographical narratives are examined for evidence of new knowledges, new political consciousness, and of attempts at new meaning-making. Aliaksandra's narratives can help to see how in a crisis that brings about a collapse of the here-and-now, the 'swirls and "whirlpools"' of altered social temporalities

at work in revolutionary crisis, which in Alhadeff-Jones' words 'manifest the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social dynamics that (trans)form individuals and collectives, day after day' (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021, p. 312) can be liberating, and can allow the emergence of ideas 'that in normal times would be considered unacceptable, but which under the impact of the disruption, take on their full meaning' (p. 314). Such a 'moment' of liberation and processual '*Krisis*' (p. 312) which can come together in the accelerated temporalities of social change, can offer the individual swept up by the 'flow' of things, Alhadeff-Jones suggests, the reflexive opportunity to emancipate themself from the currently hegemonic social order and actively re-discover and re-appropriate their everyday life and with it, new learning opportunities and knowledge (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). This special capability by which the individual integrates and (re)assembles wholly diverse areas of experience and lays the ground for 'creating new cultural and social structures of experience' (Alheit, 2022, p. 10) generates the 'individual logic', Alheit argues, of 'ongoing biographical learning' or 'biographicity' (p. 10). Biographicity, then, when we are looking at Aliaksandra's learning response to the turbulent experiences of social protest, refers to her way of finding access to what Alheit calls 'a unique productive resource for dealing with oneself and the world' (p. 14) and the 'logic' of biographical learning inevitably involves forms of resistance to external influences and threatening events.

The language of the narratives: A plurilingual option

I began interviewing young adults from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union over 20 years ago[4]. Economic difficulties, a lack of perspectives and the important expansion of academic mobility in the EU through joint degrees and increased commodification of university studies were clearly factors driving young members of the new middle classes to emigrate, and the new trajectories of the educational and personal biographies of this generation, working as I was at a university with high numbers of students from those countries, came to occupy my attention (Evans, 2012; Evans & Kurantowicz, 2009; see Woodward & Kohli, 2001). An interest in post-soviet biographies was logical as it dovetailed with my own original studies in the UK and Germany (Russian language and history, Soviet history, Czech, Polish) and my abiding interest in the language(s). Thus, when I turned my attention more to this group of young adults, my interest was focused on identity construction and in particular the role of language(s) in that process. This began with the biographies of young Ukrainians, as the cultural conflict around Russian or Ukrainian played itself out inside families and emerged in learning biographies (Evans & Kurantowicz, 2009). What in 2009 seemed for my interviewees still to be a matter of private choice – to speak or study in one language rather than another – had become by 2014-2015 in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea by Russia a matter of territory, national identity and civil war with correspondingly harrowing effects on the people and their stories (Evans, 2016). Then came 2020 in Belarus.

I originally proposed to Aliaksandra that she speak Russian to have a natural stream of talk, stemming as she does from a family of Russian speakers with traditional family links in the Russian Federation. Yet English was and had to be an option for a 26-year-old IT specialist with obvious intercultural competence, and, not surprisingly, excellent command of English. In the 11 recorded interviews and accounts to date (Autumn 2025), Aliaksandra has in fact woven an idiosyncratic pattern of language choice between English and Russian, as she moves between the two languages, evidently and declaredly seeking the language code most suited to the narrative work in hand. This is reflected in

the interview extracts that I discuss further on. After the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, however, the always-present conflict between Russian and Belarusian has again made itself more sharply felt (on this fundamental linguistic conflict, see Bekus, 2014a, 2014b). This linguistic disjuncture – present throughout Aliaksandra's talk – has not been resolved to date.[5]

I see it as a keystone of careful listening and cautious interview work that all analysis and discussion of language 'data' resulting from a context of spoken interaction (though this holds, too, for the written language) refers *at all times* to the language actually used in the interview interaction, for as Aneta Pavlenko persuasively argues:

> Settling on a single language in such studies signals an assumption that stories and interviews are simply descriptions of facts, whereas in reality the presentation of events may vary greatly with the language of the telling. The insistence on one language only also deprives bi- and multilingual speakers of an important linguistic resource with a range of semantic and affective functions, namely code-switching. (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 172)

In fact, the interaction is a *sensitive space* – not simply a collection of related facts – in which the linguistic repertoires or resources which people draw upon in constructing accounts in interactive encounters can unfold and an attempt at 'self-translation' for co-understanding can take place (Seale, 1998; Wierzbicka, 2003). For where there is a choice of language, or where – as so often the case – multilingual speakers encounter one another, the choice of the interview language(s) clearly has significant methodological and analytical consequences for the development of the interaction and will obviously determine too the way 'data' is presented (and what is understood to be 'data'), how transcripts are created and how extracts from these transcripts are used. The plurilingual conduct of the research relationship ought to help Aliaksandra in finding, and myself in perceiving, the linguistic detail which enriches and thickens the narrative description proper. Beyond that, the use of a prestigious language of communication (here English) can make it possible for us to establish complicity, to project and share power, 'translating' and othering ourselves (and each other) respectively, though it can be double-edged (Duszak, 2002; see also Fanon, 1952).

Jointly participating in what Auer calls 'linguistic acts of identity' (Auer, 2005, p. 404) is an immensely important resource in an uncertain relationship, a relationship marked by the critical differences between Aliaksandra and myself – age, gender, status, language, nationality. In interviews I conducted much earlier on with Egyptian teachers and academics I looked at how the (prestigious) foreign *lingua franca* can also be switched to when talking about forbidden, risqué or tabu subjects, permitting the speaker to 'translate' or 'other' themselves and move more freely in difficult spaces of discourse (Evans, 2004b, 2007). Such elements of interdiscursivity enrich the work of meaning-making that these learning biographies represent and a close analysis of what happens in the micro levels of talk help to follow how learning and change can be told.

A simple transcription

The transcription of the interview language is kept 'simple': that is, it remains almost entirely free of punctuation, no attempt being made to 'clean up' the language, leaving the *verbatim* transcript in Tom Wengraf's terms a 'version zero' (Wengraf, 2001, p. 213). Translations of what is said are provided (but *only* for simple convenience), and they are both parsimonious and consciously free of any claim to literary translation standards. Naturally, this is a methodological decision, and as Elinor Ochs pointed out decades ago

(Ochs, 1979), the method of transcription opted for represents a first inescapable level of analysis of the spoken interaction of the interviews. Bourdieu, in the monumental *Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu, 1993) argues eloquently for a 'cleaning-up' of the interview transcript[6] in the interest of the reader and what he calls a 'démocratisation de la posture herméneutique [democratization of the hermeneutic stance]' which, as he sees it, is habitually fixated on more edifying literary models than the 'récits ordinaires d'aventures ordinaires [ordinary stories of ordinary adventures]' of ordinary lives (p. 1421; for a contrasting view see Wengraf, 2001). On this point, I share Anna De Fina's approach, whose work on narrative research consistently provides sensitive analysis of, and respect for the original language of the interview and its presentation (De Fina, 2003; De Fina & Tseng, 2017). I employ a modified version of Conversation Analysis transcription symbols (Silverman, 2001; Wengraf, 2001) and a similar approach to the analysis of paralinguistic features in interview talk as that used by Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs in their impressive study of the narratives of the agoraphobia victim Meg (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Evans, 2008, 2013).

Thus, in the extracts presented here, where Aliaksandra chose to speak Russian, and where finer details of the Russian spoken discourse – prosody, hedging, etc. – are explicitly discussed, the original Russian is retained. The Russian verbatim 'version zero' (1), references to significant paralinguistic features (2), and the basic translation (3) are presented, in that order, in table form. When the paralinguistic features of the speech in Russian-language extracts are not examined, the basic English translations are presented alone for reasons of space and marked, for example, as 'Extract 4 (orig. Russ.)'. The date of the interview/audio recording/email communication is given in parentheses at the end of each extract. Some basic transcription signs regarding features of talk like hesitation, loudness, pausing, are also given underneath the extract where appropriate and helpful (for a fairly exhaustive presentation of the transcription and paralinguistic markup conventions I have used, see Evans, 2004a).

Biographical narratives of transgression and hope

The challenge to narrative resources that comes with disruption of everyday life expresses itself in bare questions: what has changed? How can I describe it? Can I *risk* describing it?[7] Uncertainty, fear, anger, pride, disgust and hate, even, may have assumed central roles in what was previously a more indifferently developing life story. The physical and emotional spaces in which life increasingly gets caught up are new (discovering the city differently through the marches), exhilarating (the slogans, the shouting, the solidarity) but also menacing and frightening (men in balaclavas, stun grenades, explosions, running, hiding, being chased). An everyday shareable and knowable world of family and work, bus stops and metro stations is invaded by the urban gulag archipelago of detention centres, KGB prisons and flea-ridden jails, ominous places whose names alone generate fear, but also sow resistance (Cimafiejeva, 2021). For the poet Julia Cimafiejeva, for Aliaksandra and many more, these threatening places become commonplace matters, the new routine (Lewis, 2021). For example, after the arrest and sentence to 10 days in the detention centre of a colleague of Aliaksandra's for distributing leaflets before the August 2020 election, Aliaksandra in this first extract says:

Extract 1 (orig. Engl.).

> Uhm yeah I mean it was a SHOCK? to me because (.) uhm AFTER? the elections I mean arrests are a kind of common thing and you kind of exPECTED it to happen but back then?

> uhm (.) 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 for example I've just heard an hour ago my boss from my previous place of work he was caught … and they are having trials today … it's kind of news you hear every week especially after Sundays. (05.10.2020)
>
> CAPITALS=emphasis, raised volume; ?=rising tone; (.)=hearable pause or break in flow

Elsewhere in her narratives, as here (WHAT THE HELL?) pride and satisfaction can be heard, mixed with derision for the state and its thugs, doubtless because Aliaksandra has, in fact, crossed the threshold from passive onlooker to active critic and has learnt a new habitus, that of the protester. She has crossed over into a different emotional and intellectual territory and in this radically new learning space she rehearses the voice to tell her story. Almost identical experiences can be found, for example, in the poems written in the first days of the revolution and cited by Simon Lewis (Lewis, 2021) or in the poet Julia Cimafiejewa's diary of the revolutionary autumn published subsequently in Berlin (Cimafiejeva, 2021). In these testimonies, too, the happy routine is thrown out of joint by the invasion of violence.

In the extract above, Aliaksandra passes, too, in the space of few words through a learning trajectory that reduces the passage of real time to a hazy 'back then' and fast-forwards to 'after the election'. Both expressions are signposts for – it is understood – wholly and radically diverse life-worlds. And along with time, embodied experience evolves in exponential fashion. Alheit (2018) points out in this regard that although the logic of 'the already formed biographical sense structures subsequent actions and interpretations of a subject' (p. 15), that is, biographical sense determines to some extent how someone will respond to experiences, biographical resources – *biographicity* – are not merely the sum of things learnt. The addition of street violence and repression are not simply addable to a life of routine tranquillity. At least, not without some drastic reassessment of self and relationships to things and people. Narratives of learning and their relationship to their own recent well-trodden paths and the increasingly problematic personal knowledge they are required to process and consume, are caught up, too, in a mesh of new and disruptive discourses, of power, of personal agency, as well as personal defeat. Aliaksandra's narratives, then, are under pressure to make (new) sense of the experiences they communicate.

Deep in the skin: From transgression to agency

Raymond Williams commented, as was already noted, on the depth of such experiences, pointing out the deep penetration of identification processes in the body language of individuals; the rules of society, he wrote, 'run very deep'. To quote him in full, he writes that such rules 'are often materialised, and in inheriting them as institutions we inherit a real environment, which shapes us but which we also change. We learn this environment in our bodies, and we are taught the conventions' (Williams, 1965, p. 137).

When those conventions are directly thrown into doubt, when they are flouted, the entire repertoire of socialised and embodied behaviours and practices may be also thrown into disorder. This may very well be liberating, emancipatory. Certainly, Aliaksandra's narratives bear witness to the emancipatory effects of the radical break the year 2020 brought. Yet, coming against the backdrop of unquestioned and accepted routines and the 'everyday phenomena of low amplitude' that may be said to 'constitute the banality of everyday life' (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021, p. 317) it is likely to be unsettling or menacing. The

new fluidity of the conflict erupting in society is reflected in conflict that Aliaksandra experiences in her own person. Civil obedience, running beneath the skin, so to speak, is confronted by civil disobedience. She refers to such an ambiguous moment, a very obvious example of disruption of the normal and transgression of embodied routine, in her account of what it means to walk, not as one 'should', on the pavement, but in the midst of a protest march along the middle of the road.

This passage in Russian, as already indicated, is presented in table form, with analytical remarks to paralinguistic features in the central column. Line numbers have been added here for convenience.

Extract 2.

1	мы **выходим** и **идем** маршем	*Repetition: agentic verbs of*	we go out and we go on the
2	по **проезжей части** это тоже	*going (out) проезжей части/on*	march in the road that's also a
3	очень странное чувство	*the road*	very strange feeling because
4	потому что мы никогда раньше		before we never just walked out
5	не гуляли просто **по проезжей**	*проезжей части/on the road*	in the road right out in the road
6	**части** особенно когда дороги		especially if the road wasn't
7	не перекрыты И в начале		closed off and at the beginning
8	первый раз когда мы		the first time when we went out
9	**выходили** на даже там не	*Agency of going out (for the*	and the road wasn't even closed
10	было перекрыто движение	*first time)*	off to traffic I felt a kind of fear
11	чувствую себя **какой-то страх**	*Hedging: какой-то страх /*	that it was forbidden like I would
12	что это **запрещено** наверное	*some kind of fear*	a role might be played by the fact
13	буду может играть роль что	*Repetition of запрещено / for-*	that for more than 20 years we
14	больше 20 лет мы жили в	*bidden*	live within such strict limitations
15	таких строгих рамках что это	*Repetitive triplet of negatives:*	that it wasn't possible to do
16	**нельзя делать всё запрещено**	*←нельзя делать, всё*	anything like that everything was
17	**за всё последовать наказание**	*запрещено / not allowed,*	forbidden everything was
	(16.10.20)	*forbidden, punishment follows*	followed by some kind of
			punishment. (16.10.20)

The magic she evidently felt doing this can perhaps be gauged by the studied repetition of key terms, emphasising in their turn the movement of her narrative. An overall frame is anchored in the semantic fields of agentic verbs of movement (идем/we walk, гуляли/we walked along, выходили/went out), expressions of space and place (по проезжей части/on the road, перекрыто/blocked off, жили в таких строгих рамках/lived in strict limitations), notions of loss of agency in the face of prohibition and punishment (запрещено/forbidden, нельзя делать/not allowed, наказание/punishment). The strange feeling that becomes some kind of fear (first странное чувство/ then страх) at breaking the rules for the first time is framed by the sober details of routinely marching along the roads and this initially cautious narrative is weighted down by circumstantial repetition (twice repeated по проезжей части / on the tarmac; twice the description дороги не перекрыты / the roads weren't closed off and не было перекрыто / it wasn't closed off). Then we hear the subsequent jump from the collective мы / we (three times, lines 1, 4 and 8) to the attempted first-person account чувствую себя/I feel, буду/I'll … (lines 11 and 13) which is replaced immediately by an impersonal hypothetical rationalisation (это запрещено наверное буду может играть роль/it was forbidden like I will … a role might be played) which can presumably be heard as a defensive move, as if the fear described might be deemed trivial or banal. After decades of living in a straitjacket, she recites a trinity of repression as justification of her fear by employing a particular form of repetition to create meaning 'by the recurrence and recontextualisation of words and phrases in discourse' (Tannen, 2007, p. 9). In fact, Aliaksandra is using

what Tannen (2007) describes as a 'triplet' (p. 69), in this case a series of three semantic re-phrasings: nothing was allowed / everything was forbidden / punishment always follows.

Transgression and punishment

Transgression, Aliaksandra tells us, was always followed by punishment. To make her point, she employs a fascinating piece of juxtaposition in a seamless transition from (i) an account of extreme insecurity and physical fear of police violence to (ii) her feelings as a child in school trying desperately not to be noticed by the teacher. The contrast is surprising and unexpected, and the language use is extremely economical.

Extract 3.

ну это было достаточно **страшно**-то сейчас достаточно привычная картина после того как 2 месяца мы видим и более **страшные** вещи и картины как людей **сбивают** можно тогда никого не **сбивали** были жёсткие столкновения **были была были было** такое что **били** но не в тех масштабах и не так агрессивно то всё было и конечно на меня это произвело очень большое впечатление и **я действительно никогда в жизни не чувствовал себя настолько вот не в безопасности в своей стране в центре города** не то что даже просто **страшно я просто не могла никуда идти** и тот момент когда не проходили у меня я не могла даже поднять глаза потому что мне было **страшно** встретиться взглядом это что-то из разряда **как в школе когда ищут кого вызвать к доске ты боишься поднять взгляд чтобы учитель не выбрал тебя** ты **пытаешься так быть незаметным** чтобы чтобы они тебя не заметили (05.10.2020)	*Repeated references to fear* ***frightening***, ***terrible***, ***cruel*** *Repetition of beating, beat, hit* ***сбивают сбивали жёсткие*** *столкновения* ***били*** *Shift to generalisation* ***были была были было*** _____ *Start of personal narrative* *Acute insecurity in hitherto safe life spaces – loss of agency* ***в своей стране в центре города*** *Sense of being trapped and surrounded by danger* *Juxtaposition police lines/school as personal narrative focuses on psycho-emotional state* ***пытаешься так быть незаметным*** *Trying to not be noticed/that they don't see you* *Loss of agency*	well that was quite **frightening** that now quite usual picture after all that we have seen in 2 months and more **terrible** things and pictures like them **beating** people possibly then they didn't **beat** anyone these were rough fights **they were it was they were it was** like they **beat** people before but not to the same extent and not so aggressively that was all and of course that made a really big impression on me and **I had really never in my life felt so unsafe in my own country in the centre of the city** not so it was simply **terrifying** I simply **couldn't go anywhere** and in that moment they were round me and I couldn't even raise my eyes just couldn't because **I was so afraid to meet their gaze it was something out of the ordinary like in school when writing they call someone to the blackboard you are scared to raise your eyes in case the teacher picks you** you try your hardest **to not be noticed** so that so that they don't notice you. (05.10.2020)

The core of the passage is a pattern of fear and violence: страшно and страшные/frightening, 4 times; сбивают, сбивали, били/beating, beat, hit. Harmless adverbial quantifiers and comparatives are used in an expressively repetitive, disruptive fashion: было достаточно страшно/it was *quite* frightening (*enough*); более страшные вещи/*more* frightening things; достаточно привычная картина/a *quite* usual picture, более страшные … картины/*more* frightening pictures. The passage passes from 'we'

to 'I/me' to generalised 'you' as it pans in from the shared experience to the immediate freezing effect it had on Aliaksandra herself and then passes interestingly into a reserved and neutral general 'you' when Aliaksandra in fact focuses in on well-known yet certainly here intensely personal embodied memories of her childhood and teens. Aliaksandra's account appears to be torn here between her 'new' agency and transgression on the one hand, and the embodied experience of women protesters faced with the hardened heteropatriarchal menace represented by the state police apparatus during the autumn of protest, on the other. Her experience, in its anguished ambiguity can arguably serve nevertheless as evidence of how 'female voices and actions serve as testimonies of their agency functioning within structures of subordination', as suggested by Natallia Paulovich in her questioning of the feminist character of much of the women's protests so prominent in the Belarusian autumn (Paulovich, 2021). Aliaksandra's transgression and fear of punishment, having been thrust into contestation while presumably still living within normative gender roles, seem to show that 'the fact of being subjected to established gendered norms does not eliminate the possibility of transgressing them' (Paulovich, 2021, p. 44). In addition, here again, Aliaksandra's narrative weaves a pattern of images in time and space. Her first remarks referring to pictures of beatings may refer back to the bloody days immediately after the stolen elections, images that went around the world (belarusinfocus, 2022)[8], images produced over days and weeks, in the capital Minsk and the regional towns; the whole country is evoked in the same breath as the city centre; we see her in a protest in the street close to the police lines, her head down, her eyes averted, afraid, and we see her through this as a child or teenager in her school, in the classroom, afraid of the teacher's gaze, years before, perhaps lived and relived many times, revisited and relived in the same moment now.

The knowledge of the people, the knowledge of the regime

Speaking of the transition from an emotional to a more distanced, rational, view of lived experience (historically connected with the social transition from country to town or the passing of urban working-class communities), Raymond Williams comes close to expressing what the biographical narrative can produce:

> For what is at issue in all these cases, is a growth and alteration of consciousness: a history repeated in many lives and many places which is fundamentally an alteration of perception and relationship. What was once close, absorbing, accepted, familiar, internally experienced becomes separate, distinguishable, critical, changing, externally observed. (Williams, 2016, p. 427)

This alteration of perception – a level of learning which generates the ability to distance oneself from surrounding events and question what has happened, can be heard, too, in Aliaksandra's relation to the city of Minsk. She tells an emotionally disarming story of how the political movement leads her to discover her city (see also Cimafiejeva, 2021). And the measure of the change in perception that her gaze and her voice are undergoing can be judged by the way she contrasts her own learning path to the (obviously less comforting) way the regime also learns:

Extract 4 (orig. Russ.).

> I think these are 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 yes I think the way that how it works and all the different routes we walk along that's also a good way of getting to know the city some central places but also it's interesting in itself and at the same time I think about how the military and the militia and the OMON also study the city but not in the same sense as we do experience (.) two weeks after when first of all all the time our column couldn't gather to a crowd (###) and I they continually broke us up became obvious that in the same way we kept on gathering together at the Stela[9] or on the way to the Stela the militia and the OMON also were working out how to block the street the paths there were working out how to react as quickly as possible. (16.10.2020)

This analytical stance voiced in these sections of her narratives is surprising proof of the acquisition of new 'expert knowledge'. The massively concentrated experience gained in only a few weeks after the falsified August 2020 elections is a hothouse for accelerated learning. Hundreds of thousands learn to see the political topography of their cities and their country from a radically new angle (Bekus, 2021a). In this sense, Aliaksandra's fundamental transgression – leaving the staid view from the pavement and occupying instead the endlessly wide triumphal boulevards of Minsk and challenging the phalanxes of 'cosmonauts' (as the heavily armoured riot police were baptised) to take them back again, – represents one piece of the mosaic her new knowledge is made up of.

Aliaksandra learns to see with cool accuracy the different forms of knowledge – the knowledge of the people and the knowledge of the regime:

Extract 5 (orig. Russ.).

> I think for them it was also all very new the way we walk and enjoy our walk they have to think how to stop us so I think they were good ideas to change the meeting place and our direction. (16.10.2020)[10]

Accommodation and translation – coming to terms with and investing the human and non-human environment with new meaning – are steps on the way from simple transgression to agency. The accommodation to new forms of experience can engender new forms of knowledge that in turn transform the relationship to lived experience. Returning to Raymond Williams' words quoted above, he stresses that the former memory – in Aliaksandra's case the monolithic Minsk reproducing Soviet imaginaries (Bekus, 2017, 2021a) that cedes to the newly discovered city streets of the people – is less important perhaps than 'the perception and affirmation of a world in which one … can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life' in which the reclaiming of the city streets and the solidarity experienced in the marches, following Williams' idea, are experiences of 'directness, mutuality, sharing …' (Williams, 2016, pp. 428-429). For Aliaksandra this means deriving a part of the necessary biographical resources from lived experience as a child and teenager and from new resources thrown up spontaneously and unexpectedly in the succession of the mass protests.

Radical otherness and hope

Many radically 'new' things 'after the election' are accepted as routine. Arrest, the conditions in the detention centres, the prospects of mistreatment or worse. The undercurrent of anxiety and fear resurfaces frequently, and very naturally, at different and repeated points in her narratives. It is one thing, she says, to know a lot about the police from the social media. It is quite another to come face to face with them:

Extract 6 (orig. Russ.).

> But it alone that first experience was frighteningly scary because I had looked a lot in the social media for information but when you come up against this in reality in real life it's all obviously completely different and obviously it causes completely different emotions and after that it stayed with me somehow for a while and such fear in part faced with such people in black in balaclavas with covered faces in uniform. (05.10.2020)

The new 'expert knowledge' referred to already that Aliaksandra can be thought to have acquired is a radical sense of otherness arising in reaction to the turn from initial hope in the phase 'before' to the menace of the political phase 'after' the elections in August 2020. This active alterity is frame-changing, making explicit new perspectives of meaning (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021), aiding Aliaksandra's openness to new discourses of action, protest, of resistance. In a very concrete, hearable sense, it makes it possible (and necessary) for Aliaksandra to develop a narrative discourse that can move on, avoiding entrapment in the 'failure' of the protests. This new discourse, hopeful and determined rather than exhilarated, transforms and transcends the dreary ontologies of violence offered by the regime in Minsk. On the 16th of October 2020, Aliaksandra expresses the difficult union of possibility and possible failure thus:

Extract 7.

> yeah but altogether the past two months were like emotional swings? because you feel the good things and you feel something good is going to change there is no way back we can't go back where we are now but then you see how people are attacked and the interviews of how people are treated (.) and that no-one is punished (.) for this and it brings you down … and you kind of live in these two states when you feel very inspirational then you feel upset and brought down. (16.10.20)

The last days of Belarus

The tone of her narrative darkens subsequently even more as the situation on the ground becomes threatening and once again breaks with routines. Mid-November 2020 saw the death of the young activist Raman Bandarenka (hecksinductionhour, 2020). He lived in the flats around the iconic Square of Changes, a normally drab courtyard between the blocks of flats on Chervyakov St. in Minsk which became a hub of the courtyard revolution (see Shparaga, 2021), hosting tea parties and lectures, dance and concerts, and waging daily guerilla warfare with the security forces (Deutsche_Welle, 2022; Novaya_Gazeta, 2020). There, as Aliaksandra relates with a mixture of irony and bitterness, a war is being waged to paint, and paint over, murals of protest. Every day the municipal workers would arrive and paint over the murals. Every night they would be restored and embellished further. Every evening the people of the surrounding flats gathered to drink tea and eat cake, sing songs, discuss and watch power-point presentations about democracy and protest. Bandarenka famously 'went out' to guard the courtyard's red and white coloured ribbons from the frequent destructive visits of plain-clothes men, the 'tikhari' or 'creepers' (Walker, 2020). He went out and never returned. Aliaksandra wrote to me:

Extract 8.

> I was stressed the whole day crying because of Roman[11], who died in the evening. People are shocked and very angry and there will be a reaction. I also read an article about a teen who is accused of throwing a Molotov at police and he is being kept in a detention centre for 3 months, he is physically and psychologically abused. The whole day was very tense, I was hoping that Roman would survive, it's very sad and tragic. There's going to be some commemorative actions tomorrow all over the city. (e-mail 12.11.2020)

After returning home again from a march, Aliaksandra has this to say after Bandarenka's death:

Extract 9.

> For the past three weeks it felt like going to meetings is like voluntarily going to slaughter. People start arguing among themselves in chats, others are afraid to go anywhere at all. There are various conflicts and points of view at different levels, I'll keep them in mind to tell you about it. (15.11.2020)

In the next days, the police and OMON forces effectively take control of the streets and begin their new strategy of total repression.

A new world

If we suppose that social learning, learning in movements – also unconsciously or reluctantly – learning in new, unheard of, frightening, challenging forms of social interaction can work to strengthen, as José Caride, Rita Gridaílle and Laura Crespo argue, 'the social fabric of the community and the internal resources of the territory, as well as improving and strengthening the capacities of people who live there', to then enable 'processes of social inclusion and cohesion, as well as of democratic culture to unfold' (Caride et al., 2022, p. 230), then the significance of the suppression of the Belarusian revolution for the learning experiences of Aliaksandra and her thousands of fellow demonstrators in 'one big sea'[12] is obvious.

The translation of the unacceptable or previously unimaginable violence unleashed after 9 August 2020 into a biographical resource – if not of hope, then at least in a form capable of generating a narrative of determination and stoic resistance without falling victim to cynicism and apathy – is achieved in the polyphonic crescendi of Aliaksandra's buoyant, exhilarating narratives that raise her up every time the street battles and police 'safari hunts' chasing protesters threaten to pull her down. On the 16th of October 2020 she told the following, framed and interwoven with insistent incidents of fear and violence, but the language fights back and then soars again. I have divided the following into four separate extracts for convenience only, and I have attached to each an emblematic title.

Extract 10. THIS IS OUR CITY!

люди обычно кричают на митингах (**ESp**) это наш город и поначалу это было просто одна из речовок что-то чтобы люди могли кричать и чувствовать вместе но вот спустя 2 месяца в нём **как-будто открылся как будто начинаешь** понимать его	*Embedded speech transports the protesters' voices claiming possession of city* *Repetition and hedged shift to direct employment of inclusive 'you'*	people usually shout at the meetings (**ESp**) this is our city and at the beginning it was simply one of the chants just something so that people could shout and feel together but after two months **like something opened up like you begin** to understand the real sense of it

настоящий смысл того что стоит за этими словами и ощущения в это время **как будто мы все находимся** на каком-то огромном празднике (16.10.20)	_____- *Repetition of hedge* *Shift to agentic 'we'*	with these words and the feelings **it was like we were at that time all at some great holiday.** (16.10.2020)

(ESp) = embedded speech –- others' talk, own other talk, interior talk

This is a highly agentic piece of talk. Aliaksandra is here putting her interpretive stamp on a vast and for her highly significant experience. The generalisation of the first half is explained as belonging to 'before'. After two months, she states, a sudden discovery of the 'real sense' of the words 'this is our city' was disclosed. The drama of this epistemic 'leap' is condensed down to an intimate revelation: 'как будто начинаешь понимать/like you begin to understand'. Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs would say that in these words we hear 'a dialogue with herself … happening here and now', and further, that 'we are in the experience … privy to her private thoughts' (Capps & Ochs, 1995, pp. 58-59). We are, of course, not really in her head. She has, however, brought the remembered experience through strongly affective foreshortening close enough to us, so that we can, as it were, be there with her. And we can almost share the sense of new awareness she has constructed. In fact, she seems to make us want to, and possibly we do, share.

Extract 11. A FESTIVAL OF SMILING FACES (orig. Russ.).

> of course the last two the last two Sundays were more rough but before that specially in the summer when we walked in **giant crowds** and around you were **thousands of people** all of them were happy with **smiles** on their faces it seemed **it was just some kind of huge festival** all these really beautiful dresses with placards with flowers everyone greets the others with **smiles** and even when we went up to the cordons where the OMON the militia the security forces were standing **aach** it seemed some way strange that that had to be here in the middle of such a joyful atmosphere. (16.10.2020)

The affective stacking of degrees of hyperbole (giant, huge, thousands, really beautiful, everyone) combined with the agentic shift from rough to euphoric (happy, smiles, festival, beautiful dresses, joyful) culminates in a first example of a kind of dreamy prosodic exhilarated state (**aach**) that we hear again in the next extract.

Extract 12. THOUSANDS WENT OUT!

также когда после событий 9ого 11ого числа когда происходили самые жёсткие спички задержания избивания людей с 12ого числа начались акции женщин цепей солидарности с белыми цветами вдоль дорог и я всю неделю ходила на них у себя в районе выходила **наверно тысячи людей** это довольно спокойный спальник где много пенсионеров много арендного жилья для людей из из силовых	*Precise historic time frame* _____ *Actions of women, chains of solidarity, white flowers* *Agentic first person and personal space of belonging* *Affective emphasis of size of march* _____ *Contrast between numbers of demonstrators and the 'sleepy', elderly, police dormitory district*	also when after the events of the 9th 11th August when the most violent peaks of arrests of beatings of people happened the actions of the women's solidarity chains began with white flowers along the roads and the whole week I went on them in my district I went out **really thousands of people** and it's a pretty sleepy area there are lots of pensioners lots of council flats for people from the the security forces but even so even in our small

структур но при этом даже в нашем небольшом районе где низкоэтажные дома не такая плотная как в других новых микрорайонах даже при этом вышло **тысячи людей** и мы стояли до до ночи люди проезжая бибикали **сигналили машины** и **вот эти сигналы** когда люди поддерживают тебя показывают что они заодно с тобой **аах**	*Use of diminutives and negative comparison as contrast with more densely populated areas of protest* *Repetition: numbers of protesters* *affective emphasis via repetition* *Prosodic indexicality*	district there are no high-rise flats it's not so heavily populated as in other new districts and even so thousands of people went out and we were standing till late and people passing sounded their horns **the cars were signallings and these signals** when people support you they are showing that they agree with you **aach.**

Considering briefly this extract in Russian, it is easy to hear Aliaksandra's discomfort that she lives in a district of Minsk more or less designated for families of the security forces, military, militia, and that routine political work there was risky. Here, however, her pride and happy wonder are easily hearable when she repeats, almost savouring it, тысячи людей/thousands of people and the cars: сигналили машины и вот эти сигналы/the cars signalled and these signals. The language slows down through these repetitions and becomes here a dreamy drawl of prosodic indexicality[13] finishing with a sighing aax/aach, and the relationship has moved from 'I' to 'people' (and the people are arrested and beaten, other people are pensioners, other people still are security forces people) and finally she addresses 'you': the universal protester, you the narrator, and you – the hearer and reader of these words. The perspective shifts persuasively from the agentive inner voice looking outwards, the larger picture puts analytical distance as in a film or an aerial view from a drone with different actors and different actions, and then the image ('you') becomes simultaneously a snapshot of an epistemic moment of clarity ('they are supporting you') and the eyes of the speaker are on you as she asserts her interpretation of the event and her language realises the practice of 'doing' meaning.

Coming now to the final extract of this narrative, we have a condensed tapestry of the most emblematic phenomena of the Belarusian summer of 2020: the solidarity chains, helpers and volunteers, supply chains and transports for the masses of people, the rubbish collectors[14], the flowers, the women protesters. Almost dreamlike again, Aliaksandra comments that it was so 'unusual', so 'strange'. The second half of the extract is sounded in with a time-shift 'сейчас'/now, and epistemic verbs beat out the rhythm: 'мы не знали … не знали'/we didn't know … didn't know and are caught up again with the strong move to centre stage of Aliaksandra's 'I' and her solemn recognition of her pride in her country with an agentic-affective I feel (experience in me)/ 'я испытываю.' She has painted a broad canvas and then proffered an unambiguous example of what we can call open theorising, for she suggests an interpretation of the vast experience she has witnessed. On this terrain she finds the confidence, and the sense of drama, to state her newly found pride for Belarusians, their country, their path.

In the central column, I draw attention again to the artful use of repetitive, 'triplets' (Tannen, 2007, pp. 69-71): three-layered lists giving emphasis to moments of agency, community, and belonging.

Extract 13. SUCH BEAUTIFUL GOOD STRONG PEOPLE!

и когда мы стояли в цепях у себя в микрорайоне тоже при-приходили мужчины с охапками цветов раздавали женщинам которые стояли в	*Emphasis of agentic first person and personal space and belonging* *Triplet 1: men came/ volunteers came/people came*	and when we stood arms linked round my way in the local district men also arri- came with armfuls of flowers they distributed them to the women

этих цепях приходили **волонтёры** которые приносили **кофечай какие-то печенье конфеты** чтобы подкрепиться ходили люди с пакетами **собирали мусор** и это было **так непривычно так странно** и сейчас тоже один из слоганов люди используют цитаты из песни ESp **мы не знали друг друга до этого лета не знали что вокруг столько прекрасных добрых сильных людей** теперь мы все поддерживаем друг друга сейчас **я испытываю очень большую гордость за беларусов за нашу нацию за этот путь** который мы идём (16.10.2020)	*Objective description, employment of lists of things and people and actions* *Triplet 2: coffee-tea/biscuits/sweets* *Employment of discovered agentic 'we'* *Assertion of affective 'I'* *Triplet 3: pride in Belarusians/for the nation/for this path*	who were standing linked together in these chains **volunteers** came who brought **coffee tea different biscuits** and **sweets** to keep up their strength people went around with sacks **gathered the rubbish** and that was **so unusual and so strange** and now also one of the slogans people use quotes from a song ESp **we didn't know each other before this summer we didn't know that around us were such beautiful good strong people** now we all support each other now **I feel a very great pride in Belarusians for our nation for this path** we are walking together. (16.10.2020)

ESp=embedded speech, others' talk

Last words for Aliaksandra

The notions of 'self-translation' or radical otherness already referred to earlier on to indicate how Aliaksandra effectively 'steps out' (is indeed forced to do so) of her previous biographical frames, underlines that the foundation of biographical knowledge construction is in the relational nature of biographical narratives embedded in social learning environments. I argue that in life history accounts, people use language to recreate *lived spaces*. When someone does this, she is performing what Löw calls 'synthesis' in order to establish the space/time in question as existing in a relation of tension or opposition to her own present-time location as she perceives/claims that to be (Löw, 2001). Such an action of *synthesis*, which connects, includes or excludes people and things through acts of understanding, memory and imagination, constitutes the spaces and times inhabited by, and accessible to, the subject and others. Aliaksandra is doing just that, and the lived spaces she recreates are all in transition and renewal or redefinition. Learning is taking place in this moment of 'disjuncture', as Peter Jarvis called it. He writes that 'when individuals can no longer take their world for granted – a state that I have called disjuncture – there is a need to learn. Disjuncture may be defined as the gap between individuals' biography and perception of their present experience' (Jarvis, 2006, p. 216). Nelly Bekus in fact suggests that there was a 'sudden shift from subject to protagonist, when Belarusian society declared that it has the power to define its own future' (Bekus, 2021b, p. 3/6). The feminist philosopher Olga Shparaga argues similarly that Belarusian civil society overcame itself to become a political subject, experiencing 2020 as their political awakening (Shparaga, 2021).

To finish, and to return to Raymond Williams' cautious estimation of the long-term workings of social revolution with which I opened this paper, we can perhaps see in the shift Aliaksandra makes, from subject to protagonist, the 'ratifying sense of movement, and the necessary sense of direction. The nature of the process indicates a perhaps unusual

revolutionary activity: open discussion, extending relationships, the practical shaping of institutions' (Williams, 1965, p. 383).

All of that took place. The open discussion has shifted almost five years later to spaces outside Belarus, but it is carried forward (for example, OST, 2025; see also Red Paper, 2025). The relationships had to be rebuilt or built anew in the diaspora, while existing relationships were cut off and rendered dangerous. The shaping of institutions has been refined and elaborated on the international political stage and no longer only at back kitchen tables. The short autumn of revolution has turned into the marathon, slow, studded with sacrifice and frustration, that Aliaksandra began to see as the levels of repression in November 2020 intensified and which she took with her when she left Belarus behind.

On the 10th of June 2022 Aliaksandra sent this e-mail message from a brief but very risky visit back in Belarus:

> As for my feelings they are very mixed. I am reflecting a lot about things here. I feel that everything is not right.... my memories of the avenue we went through today were about crowds of people and police and other things. And now it's all peaceful as if nothing happened. It's like a scene from a movie or a game where the main character wakes up in some artificially created reality or is put to sleep to see good events and happy life instead of real events. So many emotions and thoughts.

Notes

1 All proper names are given in their Belarusian version.

2 Tsikhanouskaya at the time of writing routinely refers to herself in these terms. 2024 a documentary film of the same name about her was premiered (Zerkalo.by, 2024).

3 An example of the creativity may be seen in the coining of ironic and self-ironic names for the protagonists of the ongoing struggle. See for the 2020 vocabulary of protest Perova (2020). For a fuller discussion of 'protest imaginaries', see Bekus (2021a).

4 Interviewees were from Poland, Bulgaria, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Latvia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia.

5 During our most recent meeting, in June 2025, I asked Aliaksandra about her current use of Belarusian. She told me that she felt increasingly attached to using the *bielaruskaja mova* with chosen individuals and that reading in Belarusian has become more natural, though overshadowed by her urgent need to earn official qualifications in Polish in order to fulfil residence and work requirements in Poland.

6 'Ainsi, transcrire, c'est nécessairement écrire, au sens de réécrire ['Thus, to transcribe is of necessity to write, meaning to re-write'] (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1417).

7 After 2021 the collection of photographs of 2020 protesters by the security forces for the purposes of facial recognition and arrest on re-entry in Belarus became the norm. Describing the protests, posting messages, likes, re-posts became enough to warrant year-long jails sentences.

8 The original 2021 version of this frightening report of state violence still showed the un-pixelated faces of the victims, as it could not then be foreseen that facial recognition software would be employed year after year in order to continue the repression of the 2020 protests. Significantly, the young woman Maria Zaitseva, whose bloody face featured on the cover, died fighting for Ukraine in January 2025 (RFE, 2025).

9 Minsk Hero City Obelisk is a 45 meters tall monument in the shape of an obelisk located on Victors Avenue in Minsk, Belarus. The Obelisk is dedicated to the fact that Minsk was declared a Hero City on 26 June 1974 for its people's bravery during the Nazi occupation that lasted for 1,100 days. (Wikipedia, 2025).

10 Aliaksandra's growing intuitive awareness of the tactics of the revolution is echoed by Bekus (2021a) who notes the reappropriation and re-interpretation by the protesters of the historical imaginary of Belarusian partisan warfare during World War II.

11 Note her use in November 2020 of the Russian version of his name.

12 This is how Aliaksandra described the feeling of being in the giant protest marches in 2020 (personal video message sent to the author, 21.02.2021).

[13] Anna De Fina describes the prosodic force of indexicality in narrative as 'the ability of linguistic elements (for example single sounds, words, and combinations of resources such as stylistic repertoires) to evoke particular associations with identities such as groups … cultural attributions, social behaviour, and values' (De Fina, 2003, p. 385).

[14] The symbolism of the 'inherently orderly character of Belarusians' in the popular protests is pointed out by Bekus (2021a, p. 6 n.10).

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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Empowerment and adult education: A multi-level perspective

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Abstract

Empowerment, as a goal of adult education, seeks to support people to critically reflect on structural settings and to take constructive action towards social equality and social change. This article analyses empowerment and adult education from a micro-, meso-, and macro-level perspective. The key assumption is that these levels cannot be considered in isolation. Drawing on Freire (2014) and Sen (1993), the article outlines how empowerment can be fostered through adult education at each level, while also analysing the interdependencies between them. We propose a heuristic model that identifies seven characteristics for assessing the promotion of empowerment through adult education, providing a foundation for empirical research: (1) knowledge and abilities, (2) active agency, (3) cultural realities, (4) pedagogical self-conception, (5) dialogic spaces, (6) representation of interests, and (7) educational mandate.

Keywords: adult learning and education, empowerment, active agency, multi-level perspective

Introduction

In international discourse, empowerment is frequently highlighted as a key goal of adult education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023; Veloso & Guimarães, 2014). Over the past three decades, use of the term *empowerment* has increased exponentially across academic papers in a range of fields. McLaughlin (2023) even describes empowerment as a 'buzz-word' (p. 3), emphasising its widespread proliferation. It also plays a significant role in political discourse. For instance, the United Nations (2023) identify empowerment as both a key dimension of global development and a crucial aspect of

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'human well-being' (p. 44). More specifically within adult education, the UNESCO (2016) *Recommendation on Adult Learning* stresses that adult education 'empowers people to actively engage with social issues' (p. 7) and aims 'to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies' (p. 8).

Understandings of empowerment vary considerably in scope (McLaughlin, 2023). While some approaches focus on specific groups and situations, others leave the concept open to wide interpretation (McLaughlin, 2023). This breadth is also reflected in the diverse ways empowerment is conceptualised across disciplines, as will be discussed briefly in the following section. The term is 'often used but rarely defined' (McLaughlin, 2023, p. 64). It may be understood as an 'interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the state' as a structural frame (Lupton, 1998, p. 110). Institutionally organised adult education can help to mediate this relationship (Grotlüschen et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, this article proposes a theoretical framework for examining empowerment in adult education. Using a multi-level perspective of empowerment through adult education, we develop a heuristic multi-level model that links characteristics at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The article begins with a brief overview of the state of research on the relationship between adult education and empowerment, before analysing the three levels with reference to the approaches of Freire (2014) and Sen (1993). From this analysis, a multi-level model is introduced, and interdependencies between the different levels are addressed.

Empowerment and adult education: Previous research

The concept of empowerment shifts between two broad understandings: one centred on social adaptation, the other on social change. From the perspective of social adaptation, Inglis (1997; see also Galié & Farnworth, 2019) points out that empowerment focuses on fostering individual learning to enhance competences and efficiency in the workplace, enabling adaptation to rigid existing structures. In this understanding, existing structures are accepted rather than questioned. By contrast, during the social movements of the 1960s, an emancipatory conception of empowerment emerged, positioning social change, rather than social adaption, as a central goal of empowerment. Women's and civil rights movements, for instance, sought equality and challenged structural inequality and subordination. Empowerment, in this sense, can be conceptualised as a concept of agency, capability, and social change (Unterhalter, 2019). Emancipatory empowerment, therefore, is focused 'not only upon changes within individual persons, but also on the ways power structures relationships within and between different (...) levels' (Galié & Farnworth, 2019, p. 13) while critically reflecting on those structures. Empowerment as social change can be described as a bottom-up principle (Stromquist, 2015). Social change is initiated by (disadvantaged) groups, beginning at the level of the individual. By contrast, social change resulting from political decisions is seen as a top-down process. Initiated by policy bodies at a high level, decisions are transmitted downward and implemented by organisations and individuals, directing the course of social change from the top rather than the individual level (Campbell, 2001).

The concept of empowerment appears in diverse discourses, including medicine, psychiatry, social work, and adult education. In psychiatry and medicine, it refers to supporting patients in coping with illness and developing self-efficacy (Knuf, 2016; Schulz & Hartung, 2017). The focus here lies on enhancing individual competences; people are expected to become 'more self-aware, self-confident, assertive, effective, and dynamic so they can do better within the existing system, rather than change it' (Inglis,

1997, p. 10). This orientation leans towards social adaptation. In social work, however, Herriger (2020) describes empowerment in terms of disadvantaged individuals achieving 'self-determination over the circumstances of one's own everyday life' (Herriger, 2020, p. 20, authors' translation). Social work services support individuals in directing and managing their daily lives, guided by the principle of resource orientation, with the long-term aim of enabling independence from social workers' support. Here, empowerment is described as both an individual and collective process aimed at active participation in processes of change (Herriger, 2020). This understanding of empowerment in social work oscillates between adaptation and transformation: While it seeks to strengthen individual competences for navigating everyday life (adaptation), it also aspires to broader participation in processes of social change. Whether such processes transform power structures or merely alter individual behaviours within existing structures often remains open to question.

In the discourse of adult education – the focus of this article – empowerment can be seen as a process promoting equitable opportunities. It is implied that 'empowerment in and through (adult) education' (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 4) supports groups to understand, shape, and improve the contexts in which they live. From this perspective, social change emerges as the ultimate aim (Freire, 2014), with adult education serving as a means of fostering empowerment. Unlike social work, medicine, and psychiatry, adult education takes a broader view by considering groups as agents of change in their own worlds, positioning social change at its core.

A distinction can be made between institutionally organised and non-organised forms of adult learning and education (Nolda, 2015). This article focuses on organised adult education, which can initiate empowerment 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 (Freire, 2014). In this sense, empowerment can be understood as a social practice 'so that learners can be subjects and actors in their own lives and in society' (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 382). According to Campbell (2001), learning processes supported by adult education can lead to bottom-up social change.

Even though adult education is widely regarded as contributing to empowerment (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Kröner, 2020), the 'relationship between empowerment and education is (…) neither simple nor clear' (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 75). Two aspects help clarify this relationship: 'an individual's capability to gain control over the environment, and (…) reflecting the available opportunity structures' (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023, p. 175). Capabilities, embedded in a structural setting, enable individuals to overcome obstacles and pursue personal aspirations in everyday life (Sen, 1993; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). At the same time, these structural settings must be critically reflected upon, as they define the boundaries of individual capabilities (Sen, 1993; Freire, 2014). By reflecting on those structures and initiating consciousness-raising (*conscientização*), individuals can understand societal structures and mechanisms, thereby creating the possibility for collective action and social change. Organised adult education can support this empowerment process (Freire, 2014).

For adult education, considering both aspects of empowerment together implies that analysis limited to the individual level is insufficient to understand how organised adult education can encourage empowerment. This leads to the main assumption of this article: empowerment through institutionally organised adult education must be examined from a multi-level perspective. At the individual (micro) level, the organisational (meso-) level, and the (macro-) level of umbrella organisations and associations, empowerment processes can support equal opportunities, self-determination, and social transformation.

Given the interdependencies between the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of adult education (e.g., Egetenmeyer et al., 2019; Lima et al., 2016), it seems inadequate to consider only one level in isolation.

The relationship between empowerment and adult education as a multi-level phenomenon

Promoting empowerment through adult education can be considered across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The micro-level focuses on the individual and their 'range of specific factors' (Boeren, 2016, p. 145), including close (peer-)relationships. The meso-level addresses 'learning providers' (Boeren, 2016, p. 147), who can create both 'barriers and support mechanisms' (Boeren, 2016, p. 145) regarding empowerment opportunities. Within adult education, teaching-learning settings can be oriented either towards empowerment for social change or towards social adaptation. The meso-level, therefore, represents an organised constellation of interactions among multiple individuals (Boeren, 2016), and in the context of this article refers to teaching-learning settings within adult education organisations that provide and (co-)design learning opportunities. The macro-level encompasses umbrella organisations and associations in adult education, understood as an amalgamation of organisations that establish support structures for their work. They operate at the interface between societal frameworks and the work of organisations (Breitschwerdt, 2022). Boeren (2016) stresses that these levels interact closely with each other in ways that reflect the complexity and multifaceted nature of people's social reality.

Empowerment and adult education at the micro-level

Adult education can promote empowerment by supporting people's agency (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), seeing individuals as the starting point for strengthening the bottom-up principle (Campbell, 2001). At the micro-level, three aspects can be identified that organised adult education can target to foster adult empowerment: (1) *knowledge and abilities*, (2) *active agency*, and (3) *cultural realities*.

Knowledge and abilities

Knowledge and abilities are necessary for recognising and scrutinising existing power relationships, dynamics, and the broader social environment, with the aim of enabling social change. This capacity is central to empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Research shows that adult education programmes can support adults to construct and expand their knowledge and abilities, while also strengthening their belief in their own abilities – particularly given the diverse experiences accumulated across their lifetimes (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023; Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2019).

Drawing on Polanyi (1958), knowledge can be differentiated into explicit and tacit forms. Explicit knowledge – sometimes described as *know-what* and *know-why* (Jensen et al., 2016) – refers to knowledge that is formulated, communicable, and reproducible (Dinkelaker & Kade, 2011). Tacit knowledge, by contrast, encompasses experience-based or action-based knowledge and is sometimes equated with abilities (Katenkamp, 2011). This form of knowledge can only partially be transmitted through explicit knowledge and is tied to the individual in their dynamic life situation. Individuals are not immediately aware of their tacit knowledge (Dinkelaker & Kade, 2011). Building on this, Lundvall (2016) identifies *know-who* as part of tacit knowledge, referring to a person's

social networks and 'knowledge based networks' (Lundvall, 2016, p. 237) that provide access to expertise: the knowledge of who knows what and how something is done (Lundvall, 2016; Jensen et al., 2016).

Knowledge is dialogic in nature: it is not created through the passive absorption of information but through co-construction, critical engagement, and constant revision. The 'act of knowing' (Freire, 1985, p. 17) is therefore both an exploration of the world and a means of transforming it. Discussing, understanding, and critically interrogating information are central for co-constructing knowledge and fostering empowerment (Freire, 2014, 2021). The act of knowing and the resulting critical consciousness are a prerequisite for assessing situations, recognising one's possibilities, and making one's own decisions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical consciousness involves actively questioning and engaging with a given situation or information and, according to Freire (2021), can be distinguished from 'naive consciousness' (Freire, 2021, p. 42), in which individuals fail to reflect on structural conditions and instead attribute their oppressive situation solely to themselves, and 'fanatical consciousness' (Freire, 2021, p. 42), which rejects oppression but does so in an 'irrational'(Freire, 2021, p. 42) and dogmatic way without engaging in structural critique (see also Freire, 2014). The decisions and actions resulting from critical consciousness are also critical, transformative in nature, and directed towards empowerment, social justice, and social change (Freire, 2014). Ibrahim (2017) summarises that a person 'needs to *reflect* critically about his/her current status, *perceive* and aspire for better living conditions and decide and plan an *action* to bring about this aspired change' (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 206, emphasis in original). Individuals are thus positioned as agents of social change, critically assessing situations and 'actively engag[ing] in pursuing solutions to address them' (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 206).

Active agency

A person's or group's agency can be crucial for empowerment, as it aims, according to Freire (2014), 'not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become "beings for themselves"' (p. 74). Agency can be defined as a person's ability to achieve what they desire (Sen, 1993), while the aim of agency is social change. Agency not only pertains to one's well-being but also considers an action's social component: the contribution that action makes to society (Pelenc et al., 2015). However, a person's agency depends both on their '*capability*' (Sen, 1993, p. 32, emphasis in original) and on their 'beings and doings' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99) – what a person achieves – which Sen (1993) calls 'functionings' (p. 32). Capability focuses on possibilities to act, asking whether opportunity or freedom exists to achieve something that one values. 'In this terminology, a capability is synonymous with a capability set, which consists of a combination of potential functionings. Functionings could therefore be either potential or achieved' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 100). Sen (1993) summarises this as follows:

> *Functionings* represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection (emphasis in original). (Sen, 1993, p. 32)

This distinction is crucial, as it allows assessment of whether something can be implemented, whether alternatives exist, or whether it is possible to decide for oneself what the result should be (Sen, 1993).

Agency is shaped by available resources – economic, cultural, or social (Abel & Schori, 2009) – and by conversion factors, which determine the degree to which a resource can be utilised to achieve goals. These include personal, social, and environmental factors. Resources alone are insufficient to assess well-being; they only become meaningful when they can be used for the desired purpose (Robeyns, 2005). In addition to conversion factors and available resources, capability and the functionings ultimately achieved are influenced by the wider social context (Robeyns, 2005).

The context is crucial for effecting change (Freire, 2014), and agency must always be understood in relation to lived circumstances. As previously discussed in the knowledge and abilities section, critical reflection on one's life context is essential to empowerment. Agency 'cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism' (Freire, 2014, p. 85); it is interdependent with the surrounding world. Situational awareness and assessment enable individuals to 'critically recognize (...) [the] causes [of a situation], so that through transforming action they can create a new situation' (Freire, 2014, p. 47).

Taking action should be emphasised at this point. Agency alone stands for the ability to achieve something, but it does not include the action which is necessary to achieve social change. To emphasise this active component, this article uses the term *active agency*.

Active agency can be strengthened through reflection (Freire, 2014). The aim is to foster consciousness-raising that is shaped by action and reflection, critically examines conditions, and embodies participation (Freire, 2014). Freire emphasises the active role of each individual in empowerment. Action and reflection are two vital, interconnected features. Action without reflection, according to Freire (2014), is mere 'activism' (p. 87). Reflection is essential for empowerment as it helps to better understand conditions, tasks, or obstacles and supports change (Flecha, 2000). However, reflection without action amounts to 'verbalism' (Freire, 2014, p. 87). In such cases, the capacity to bring about change is absent. Empowerment therefore requires reflection and action in equal measure.

Organised adult education can strengthen active agency by providing spaces for dialogue, reflection and collaboration (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023). Such programmes often allow participants to choose their groups autonomously (Kade, 1989). Flexibility and environments that align with participants' needs and integrate their social contexts form the foundation for adult education (Kade, 1989).

Cultural realities

According to Sen (1985), (active) agency and capability are shaped by individuals' values and beliefs. Both the ability and the opportunity to act depend on what a person considers desirable (Pelenc et al., 2015). Kluckhohn (1962, as cited in Endruweit et al., 2014) defines *values* as a 'conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable' (p. 610), which guides actions and behaviour. Values therefore function as orienting principles, themselves shaped by the prevailing culture. Through actions, values can either be reproduced or changed, meaning they do not have universal validity. Culture, understood as a system of norms, behaviours, and values, is dynamic: norms operate as situation-specific guides for shared by a group and shape perceptions of one's life context (Endruweit et al., 2014).

For empowerment, Freire (2014, 1985) emphasises the importance of a culture of respect, openness, collectivity, and action. Respect for others involves viewing them as equals, refraining from imposing one's own ideologies, and entering into dialogue openly. This aligns with a culture of collectivity, as dialogue – the foundation for co-constructing

knowledge and for reflection – can only occur through mutual exchange, as well as collaborative action towards social change (Freire, 2014, 1985).
Reflecting on one's own and society's values, norms, and cultural realities can foster an understanding of individual and societal situations and contexts, as well as promote active agency. As Frediani et al. (2019) note: 'to develop people's agency, it is necessary to incorporate reflection and critical deliberation of the reasons and values that underpin it' (p. 120). Analysing prevailing norms, values, and culture can be considered part of empowerment because it encourages reflection on life circumstances and exposes oppressive structures and processes (Freire, 2014). Such reflection enables individuals to enhance social change by breaking open oppressive structures and processes (Freire, 2014). Culture as a superordinate concept and everyday cultural realities can be understood as an interplay of social relationships and experiences 'in the world and with the world' (Freire, 2021, p. 44).

Organised adult education programmes can support reflection and dialogue about values, norms, and beliefs (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023), creating spaces to experience openness, respect, and collectivity (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023; Kade, 1989; Freire, 2021) At the micro-level, then, adult education and empowerment are understood as a dynamic interplay of knowledge and abilities, active agency, and cultural realities. Rooted in dialogue, these processes enable individuals to critically interpret their life contexts and to act collectively towards social change. Both aspects draw on the culture of individuals and society.

Empowerment and adult education at the meso-level

Teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations constitute the meso-level of adult education. From an empowerment perspective, organised adult education enables participants to experience community and initiate learning processes (Kade, 1989). The community dimension of adult education fosters relationships, belonging, and mutual exchange (Park et al., 2016). Within this context, teaching-learning settings can be seen as sites with the potential to support and frame empowerment, especially through the interaction between adult educators and adult learners. Two central characteristics at this level are: (1) *pedagogical self-conception* and (2) *dialogic spaces*.

Pedagogical self-conception

According to Freire (2014), the pedagogical self-conception of adult educators can support empowerment. It either enables or undermines participants' ability to engage in dialogue in adult education organisations. Education and the construction of knowledge occur in dialogic settings (Freire, 2014), but dialogue cannot flourish within hierarchical or paternalistic structures (Freire, 2014). Instead, it requires a 'horizontal relationship' (Freire, 2014, p. 91), based on equality. Flecha (2000) refers to this as *egalitarian dialogue*, emphasising that communication must rest on arguments rather than power. This principle applies not only among participants but, crucially, between teachers and students. Freire (2014) highlights this reciprocal relationship through the concepts of the *teacher-student* and the *student-teacher*: 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach' (Freire, 2014, p. 80).

Adult learners are understood as experts of their own lives, and learning and teaching are framed as a joint process. Unlike the *banking method*, learners' self-determination and active participation are prioritised (Freire, 2014). As Flecha (2000) observes, learners

‘stop being passive receptors of knowledge and begin actively to generate knowledge’ (p. 4). Egalitarian dialogue ensures that all voices are valued, deepening communication and reflection while connecting directly to learners’ lived contexts (Flecha, 2000). Learners are understood as subjects of their self-education. Given that ‘education can be a source of symbolic violence and exclusion (…) as much as that of empowerment and inclusion’ (Boyadjiva & Illieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 68), Freire's (2014) conception of education stands as an instrument against oppression, aiming for empowerment and achieving equality through social change.

For Freire (2014) and Sen (1985), active agency is crucial for empowerment. According to Freire (2014), adult educators need to adopt an activating stance that fosters dialogue, reflection, and action, promoting active agency. Furthermore, a participatory stance is essential for empowerment at the meso-level. Viewing adult education participants as equal partners in dialogue, supporting their active agency, and promoting action and reflection as pathways to empowerment requires involving them in all areas. For adult educators, this participatory stance, which involves recognising participants as subjects of their empowerment and valuing their perspectives and experiences as central to their learning, is crucial for promoting empowerment (Freire, 2014).

Such a stance also demands critical consciousness: educators must be prepared to question structural conditions to understand the context and needs of participants. Through critical consciousness, positive development can be stimulated. The opposite approach would be to adhere to familiar structures without bringing about any change, thereby restricting the empowerment of participants (Freire, 2014): ‘For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of’ (p. 92) people. Critically questioning power relations and asymmetries fosters creative thought and practice. This can reveal alternative courses of action, which is particularly important when learners act beyond the safe space of adult education programmes in contexts pervaded by marginalisation and domination (Murray, 2013).

In the protected environment of adult education organisations, where equality and active participation are core pedagogical principles, adult educators must continually reflect on their actions to align their pedagogical self-conception with promoting the empowerment of participants. They can create a framework for empowerment, with the aim to support participants to change situations themselves (Freire, 2014). Adult educators can adopt a non-hierarchical understanding of their relationship with participants and reflect on their own role:

> In effect, this means that (...) [adult educators] must enable (...) [participants] to understand (...) the strategies and tactics by which they could be empowered to take control of their own learning. This involves enabling (...) [participants] to recognize and challenge the structures, hierarchies, privileges, rhetoric, rules and regulations of the educational institution within which they operate. (Inglis, 1997, p. 10)

Through such reflection, adult educators can align their practice with participants’ needs, ensure equitable inclusion, and model empowerment in their own actions. This requires ongoing exchanges with participants (Kröner, 2020).

In summary, a pedagogical self-conception oriented towards empowerment for social change is characterised by a dialogic, activating, and participatory stance. By meeting participants on equal terms and engaging in critical questioning of structures, educators can co-create conditions for transformation and empowerment together with participants. Engaging in self-reflection allows adult educators to repeatedly question their stance and actions to align their work with the needs of participants and to accompany them in their empowerment process.

Dialogic spaces

If dialogue is understood as a practice that enables empowerment, then creating spaces for dialogue becomes a central mission for adult education organisations. Teaching-learning settings can serve this function. Freire (2014) argues that 'the starting point for organising the programme content of education (…) must be the present, existential, concrete situation' (p. 95). Empirical evidence confirms that dialogic spaces are important for 'sharing experiences and reflections, contributing to the development of argumentation' (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023, p. 13), for dismantling stereotypes, co-creating knowledge, and supporting both self-esteem and sense of belonging (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). Such spaces also stimulate reflection on, and interpretation of, one's own world.

In dialogue with participants, addressing their world and examining their context are essential for mutual understanding (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). Understanding participants' context and aligning teaching-learning settings with it involves recognising 'that education is not neutral and takes place in the context of peoples' lives' (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 381). According to Sen (2002; see also Abel & Schori, 2009; Unterhalter, 2019), a person's possibility to act is always situated within the context of their world. Recognising participants as experts of their own lives requires the participatory design of teaching-learning settings to ensure adequate contextualisation. Without such egalitarian collaboration, adult educators cannot adequately respond to learners' realities. As Freire (2014) emphasises, genuine participatory dialogue integrates participants' perspectives and ensures that learning settings are tailored to them. Wallenstein and Bernstein (1988) summarise this process in three steps:

> The first is listening to understand the felt issues or themes of the community. Step two is participatory dialogue about the investigated issues using a problem-posing methodology. Step three is action or the positive change that people envision during their dialogue. (Wallenstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 382)

This means that in practice teaching-learning settings in adult education must be co-designed to support empowerment. Sen's (1993) concept of freedom is applicable here: individuals' ability to benefit from empowerment opportunities is constrained if access to programmes is limited. To achieve the equality envisaged by Freire (2014), ensuring low-threshold access to adult education is therefore essential.

In summary, at the meso-level, organisations can support and frame empowerment through the design of teaching-learning settings and through the subsequent interaction between educators and learners. It is crucial to adopt a dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian approach that guides interactions, both between adult educators and participants and among participants themselves (Freire, 2014; Flecha, 2000). Tellado (2012) emphasises that the success of organised adult education depends on such participatory and dialogic approaches, which require educators to critically reflect on their pedagogical self-conceptions. Additionally, research shows that participation in these forms of adult education can encourage individuals to take active roles in community processes and activism (Tellado, 2017). In Sen's (1992) terms, this expands participants' agency, functionings, capabilities, and conversion factors by making them accessible in practice. However, teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations also depend on available resources, which directs attention to the macro-level and the broader structures and decisions that shape adult education.

Empowerment and adult education at the macro-level

Empowerment through adult education can be supported by structures at the macro-level. Umbrella organisations and adult education associations play a central role in this regard: they provide support both internally – by assisting associated organisations in their work – and externally, by communicating needs and requirements regarding empowerment in adult education to societal and political bodies (Seitter, 2016). At this level, two characteristics are particularly relevant: (1) *representation of interests* and (2) *educational mandate*.

Representation of interests

Umbrella organisations and associations in adult education have a cooperative function by consolidating the perspectives and needs of adult education organisations and their stakeholders. These collective positions can then be channelled into educational policy processes (Seitter, 2016; Breitschwerdt, 2022). Grotlüschen et al. (2023) describe their role as follows:

> to collect opinions from their members, organise a consultation process, develop drafts, negotiate different perspectives, make common interests explicit, work in councils, committees, and expert groups, prepare scientific reports, address (...) bodies [of educational policy and government], and advocate for the implementation of (…) [adult education]. (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, p. 66)

To advance empowerment, this cooperative process must be based on mutual exchange (Freire, 2014) and conducted through 'egalitarian and collaborative dialogue' (Flecha, 2015, p. 93) across and between levels, as well as with educational policy bodies. Umbrella organisations and associations in adult education can thus be seen as initiators of dialogic spaces that bring together all stakeholders. A starting point for such representation is joint reflection on structures and needs across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Educational policies supporting empowerment for social change must strengthen '*bottom-up* dynamics: activities are conceived locally and are self-managed, displaying an intervention that grants agency to educational association' (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 42). At the same time, they should foster '[c]ollaborative efforts (...) in an attempt to establish a radical or participatory democracy and to foster social transformation' (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 43). Dialogic spaces also play a crucial role in ensuring that (international) initiatives – such as the CONFINTEA conferences or the Sustainable Development Goals – are not sidelined, but that their results, recommendations, and goals are integrated into educational policy discourses and translated into actions (Grotlüschen et al., 2023).

Educational policy decisions are crucial for adult education: they give impulses for the teaching-learning setting, provide resources for the work of organisations, and establish educational mandates for adult education (Gieseke, 2003; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). Yet, as Murray (2013) observes, 'decision-making has been moved further and further away from the general populous' in recent years, partly due to increasingly 'centralised and (...) transnational political bodies' (p. 16). Power asymmetries play an important role in this regard, as existing structures can exclude agents of adult education (Murray, 2013). Flecha (2022) calls for both bottom-up and top-down approaches to support social change and impact. Decisions of policy bodies and social change initiated on an individual level need to work together, while being grounded in dialogic policymaking and the integration of all levels in the decision-making processes.

Educational mandate

Besides facilitating exchanges on the perspectives and needs of adult education towards social change, umbrella organisations and association also play an important role in shaping and discussing the educational mandate of adult education. This mandate, and the orientation of adult education organisations, are highly influenced by educational policy decisions and strategies (Gieseke & Opelt, 2003). Through dialogue with policy bodies, umbrella organisations can advance an understanding of adult education as a supportive setting for critical reflection and action directed towards empowerment. The opposite, by contrast, would be to construe the mandate of adult education as merely an instrument of social adaptation to rigid structures.

By involving both meso-level organisations and micro-level actors in dialogue on the mandate of adult education, umbrella organisations and associations can support a shared understanding, and hence the work done in each organisation. In this sense, they take on a cooperative and mediating role within the broader discourse on empowerment through adult education.

In summary, macro-level structures can promote empowerment through adult education by supporting the representation of interests and by shaping educational mandates in ways that enable empowerment. Umbrella organisations and associations, in particular, have the capacity to strengthen empowerment internally – within the field of adult education itself – and externally, through dialogue with educational policy bodies.

A multi-level model of the relationship between empowerment and adult education

The preceding analysis demonstrates that empowerment and institutionally organised adult education intersect at multiple levels. Interdependencies can be identified between these levels (Egetenmeyer et al., 2019), and all must interact in order to support empowerment processes.

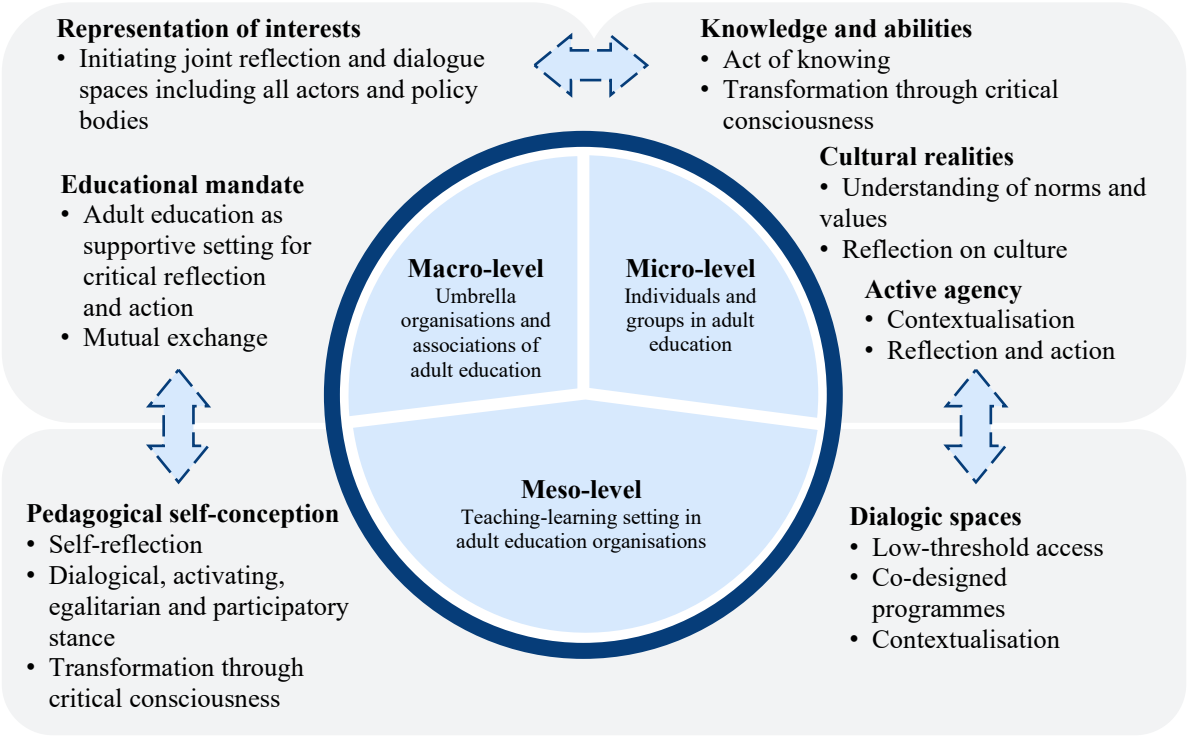
At the meso-level, teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations can provide dialogic spaces that support empowerment. Within such spaces, learners and educators can co-construct knowledge and abilities and foster active agency. Ensuring low-threshold access to adult education programmes further facilitates participation (Nolda, 2015; Kröner, 2020). Meso- and micro-level actors co-create programmes to address the lived realities of learners, who must be recognised as experts of their own world. This forms the basis for collective action (Freire, 2014). To sustain empowerment processes, participants at the micro-level and organisations at the meso-level require support from macro-level actors. Umbrella organisations and associations can provide such support structures while also initiating dialogue with educational policy bodies to articulate interests. In particular, by working with micro- and meso-level actors, umbrella organisations and associations ‘collect, bundle and select the interests of (…) micro [and meso] level members and advocate for their collective interests to influence the policy makers’ (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, p. 65). Grotlüschen et al. (2023) therefore attribute a special mediating role to umbrella organisations and associations in this process. Additionally, the educational mandate of adult education can be discussed across all levels, as well as in dialogue with policy bodies. An educational mandate oriented towards empowerment for social change can shape meso- and micro-level practice and guide the work of adult education organisations.

On the basis of the discussion of all three levels, the following definition for empowerment and adult education as a multi-level phenomenon is proposed:

Empowerment through organised adult education manifests in an egalitarian and participative stance that supports active agency while strengthening action and reflection as aspects of critical consciousness. This requires contextualisation and dialogue, underpinned by mediation between adult education and educational policy. Empowerment through organised adult education must therefore be understood through the combined interactions of the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

This definition is elucidated in the following heuristic model (Figure 1). The model incorporates the three levels and depicts their interrelationships, with each level characterised by specific features. Of particular importance is the positioning of the three levels relative to one another. The circular arrangement highlights an egalitarian examination of all three levels and their interconnectedness. This follows from the mutual dependencies that bind all levels to each other individually. As Lima et al. (2016) argue, while the macro-level may wield more influence than the meso-level, and the meso-level more than the micro-level, processes cannot be understood as one-sided. The use of arrows highlights the dynamic interactions between the levels. By rejecting a linear stage model in favour of a circular representation, the model also emphasises that empowerment is incomplete if any level is excluded. This means that all three levels are needed to promote empowerment through adult education.

Figure 1. Empowerment through adult education as multi-level phenomenon (Source: authors' own illustration)



Conclusion

This article has examined empowerment through adult education from a multi-level perspective. A heuristic model was developed to connect the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, featuring seven characteristics: (1) *knowledge and abilities*, (2) *active agency*, (3) *cultural realities,* (4) *pedagogical self-conception,* (5) *dialogic spaces,* (6) *representation of interests,* and (7) *educational mandate.* It was emphasised that empowerment processes cannot be promoted at a single level in isolation: all three levels must come together in dialogue. Only through their interconnection can the full potential of empowerment be realised. Dialogue is a central element across all levels, as it enables reflection on structures and processes at all levels and provides the basis for collective action towards social change.

The proposed model highlights the characteristics of empowerment in adult education and illustrates the interconnections between levels. It does not claim to be exhaustive but is offered as a theoretical framework on adult education that remains deliberately general in form. When applied to specific areas of adult education, the model can be refined and adapted. By integrating empowerment into a multi-level perspective, the model embeds empowerment and social change – already established as central aims of adult education (Freire, 2014) – into its conceptual foundation. Since the model is theoretically derived, empirical research should be the next step, providing evidence and further specification.

With regard to practice, the discussion shows that empowerment-oriented adult education requires organisational work (meso-level) that integrates both participant perspectives (micro-level) and supportive structures (macro-level). Moreover, all three levels must cooperate in dialogue to initiate processes of social change. Achieving this task requires a dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian stance. Within teaching-learning settings, this means ensuring the active participation of learners so that their needs and understandings are incorporated.

Beyond implications for practice, the analysis also points to directions for further research. Empowerment through adult education requires not only dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian practice, but also research approaches that embody these principles. Participative research can serve as an entry point to integrate empowerment into the research process (von Unger, 2014). Dialogue-oriented research, understood as a strand of participatory research, emphasises exchange between research and practice and seeks to shape research collaboratively for all actors involved (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, 2022). Such ‘application-oriented research’ (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, 2022, p. 19, authors’ translation) generates scientific insights together in dialogue with practice. In this way, dialogue-oriented research enables the participation of actors across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels – participants, organisations, and umbrella bodies – thus connecting the levels presented in this article within the research process itself.

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'... 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

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Abstract

This paper investigates aspects of informal and non-formal learning that emerge through adults' participation in collective actions and social movements. Drawing on qualitative data derived from interviews with members of social collectives in an urban area of Athens (Greece), the study illustrates how these spaces function as dynamic learning environments. Participants develop practical knowledge, social skills, critical awareness, and a deeper understanding of social issues. Moreover, engagement in collective actions also fosters emotional bonds, solidarity, and processes of personal transformation. The findings underline that learning is not confined to formal settings but emerges meaningfully through participation in civic life. The study highlights the pivotal role of collective action in promoting adult learning and self-awareness, contributing to the broader dialogue in the field of adult education by demonstrating how involvement in social groups constitutes a significant site for both individual and collective transformation.

Keywords: social movement learning, informal learning, transformative learning, adult education, collective action

Introduction: Informal and non-formal learning through collective action

A growing body of research highlights the significance of informal and non-formal learning in social movements, community organising, and collective actions. Unlike formal education, which follows structured curricula, informal learning emerges

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organically through lived experience, while non-formal learning is intentional but not institutionalised (Eraut, 2004). Scholars argue that these learning modes are central to the empowerment of marginalised groups, the cultivation of critical consciousness, and the sustaining efforts to achieve social change (Choudry, 2015). Despite their significance, the educational dimensions of social movements are frequently neglected within mainstream approaches to adult learning and education. Nevertheless, numerous studies reviewed by Atta and Holst (2023) demonstrate that adults, through collective efforts to enhance their daily lives and advance social change, acquire forms of knowledge and skills that would be difficult informal learning in collective action. Foley (1999) identifies two defining features of this form of learning. First, it is 'incidental and embedded in practice' (Foley, 1999, p. 39), often tacit, frequently unrecognised, and emerging through engagement in shared activities. The knowledge and skills acquired are typically context-specific and action-oriented, grounded in lived experience. Second, such learning is dynamic and unpredictable, if not impossible – to obtain within the confines of formal educational frameworks.

This study examines how adults participating in diverse collective initiatives critically assess their motivations, identify the knowledge and skills developed through their engagement, and recount the processes through which these competencies emerge. While theoretically eclectic, our analysis is grounded in a socio-cultural perspective that conceptualises learning as inherently dialogical and transformative. Within such a perspective, education is understood as a communicative and socially mediated process through which the individuals co-construct knowledge and reconstruct their cognitive and affective orientations. From this standpoint, learning entails an ongoing cognitive and emotional development shaped by cultural mediation within socio-cultural contexts. Building on this foundation, scholarship on informal learning within social movements situates learning as inseparable from collective praxis (Curnow & Jurow, 2021). Whereas socio-cultural theories emphasise development within broad social and cultural settings, movement-based perspectives highlight how participation in collective action generates knowledge, transforms identities, and nurtures critical consciousness. Learning through collective participation is not a by-product of activism but a constitutive element of it – embedded in practices of negotiation, resistance, and solidarity.

These insights foreground a central question: How does participation in collective action foster learning? The answer lies in the social contexts and practices that enable learning to occur.

Learning, from this perspective, is a social process of knowledge construction that simultaneously and in a mutually constitutive way comprises processes of identity transformation and the formation of critical consciousness in learning subjects.

Communication and interaction within enabling contexts – such as those created through collective action – are therefore fundamental to the learning process.

In adult learning contexts, communication is shaped by the emotional states, attitudes, and relationships among participants. These factors influence how meaning is constructed, trust established, and transformation achieved through dialogue (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Furthermore, as Mezirow (1997) notes, transformative learning encompasses not only rational reflection but also emotional engagement and dialogical relationships that enable adults to reinterpret and reframe their experiences.

Aspects and dimensions of adult informal and non-formal learning

The field of adult education encompasses diverse theories of learning, each grounded in distinct assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the processes of its acquisition, and

the characteristics of adult learners. These theoretical orientations shape not only how learning is defined but also how educational practices are designed, implemented, and evaluated (Illeris, 2009). Within social movements, however, learning tends to develop in informal and collective ways arising through participation in shared practices rather than through formal instruction or structured curricula.

Drawing on his analysis of informal learning in collective action, Foley (1999) identifies two defining features of this form of learning. First, it is *incidental and embedded in practice*, often tacit, frequently unrecognised, and emerging through engagement in shared activities. The knowledge and skills acquired are typically context-specific and action-oriented, grounded in lived experience. Second, such learning is *dynamic and unpredictable:* it evolves in response to shifting social, political, and organisational conditions. As participants adapt to new challenges, learning remains emergent and adaptive, often exceeding the intentions of those involved and contributing to processes of empowerment, capacity building, and social change. Hall and Clover (2005) similarly emphasise that much of the learning within social movements is tacit, rooted in experience and collective practice rather than from explicit teaching. They argue that critical reflection on tacit knowledge enables participants to articulate implicit understandings, transforming experience into conscious strategy and thereby enhancing both individual learning and the collective evolution of the movement.

Theoretical and empirical analyses of learning within, for, and from social movements explore diverse aspects of informal and non-formal learning, including participants' experiences, identity formation, meaning-making, and knowledge production (Niesz et al., 2018). Our study focuses particularly on the outcomes of informal learning among adults engaged in collective action and, in particular, how their participation fosters new understandings, skills, and transformative perspectives.

In any case, social movements function as educational spaces that foster ways of interpreting the world – not merely as it currently exists, but as it could potentially become (Mayo, 2005). Adults in these movements learn through dialogue, collaboration, and engagement in movement activities, as well as through studying materials that movements produce. Even those who are not directly involved may learn indirectly from movements' public expressions, messages, and media presence. The interpretations and lessons individuals derive from a social movement are significantly shaped by their positionality and evaluative stance toward the movement.

Observers who engage with a movement sympathetically are likely to interpret its actions and derive meanings differently than those who approach it critically or antagonistically, reflecting the ways in which social movements shape knowledge, identities, and understanding through cognitive praxis, in which social movements constitute sites of cognitive and identity formation shaped by the interpretive frameworks of participants and observers alike, as argued by Eyerman and Jamison (1991). Niesz (2022) further argues that movements foster learning, identity formation, and civic engagement not only among participants but also among external audiences who engage intellectually and emotionally with their narratives and performances.

In summary, learning in social collectivities is multi-dimensional, evolving, and mutually constitutive (Foley, 1999). It includes learning about oneself – i.e., identity construction (Jasper, 1998), learning about the movement's issues (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), learning to act – i.e., engagement in action (Melucci, 1996), learning to organise, i.e., finding appropriate forms of coexistence with others (Milan, 2015) and learning to analyse and critique – i.e., developing critical consciousness (Tarrow, 2011). Current research on learning within social movements continues to address questions about participation, processes, and outcomes of informal and non-formal learning, examining

how collective engagement fosters both individual transformation and broader social change (Atta & Holst, 2023; Shield et al., 2020).

Research purpose and methodology

Social movements encompassing a wide range of social, political, environmental, and economic concerns have increasingly emerged as pivotal agents of change.

Their role as globally recognised agents of social change has expanded considerably throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, propelled by the emergence of new forms of collective action and transnational mobilisation (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018).

Although social movements vary in form and objectives according to regional and contextual circumstances, they share key defining characteristics: engaging in collective action, a commitment to social transformation, and forms of mobilisation that often extend beyond conventional political institutions (English & Mayo, 2012). Encompassing a wide spectrum of efforts to confront social, political, economic, and environmental injustices, social movements operate across multiple scales and contexts. Among these, urban social movements have assumed particular prominence, reflecting the distinctive challenges and opportunities that cities present for collective action and change. Urban areas serve as dynamic sites of concentrated populations, economic activity, and social diversity, making them critical arenas for contestation and change. Focusing on urban social movements allows for a deeper understanding of how localised struggles intersect with broader structural issues, and how space, place, and community shape collective action. This emphasis is crucial for analysing contemporary movements that confront issues such as housing rights, gentrification, environmental justice, and public space, all of which are inherently tied to the urban experience (Mayer, 2013).

As contemporary urban phenomena unfold, we increasingly encounter what Meyrowitz (2005) has termed *glocalities* – situations in which local contexts are simultaneously shaped by, and contributing to, global dynamics. The concept of glocality – derived from the fusion of *global* and *local* – highlights this reciprocal relationship, wherein global trends are filtered through and reinterpreted by local specificities (Gobo, 2016). Despite these global influences, urban social movements fundamentally retain their local orientation. They are rooted in particular communities and are typically organised around immediate needs and conflicts, which serve as catalysts for sustained mobilisation and advocacy (Domaradzka, 2018).

This study focuses on collective activities in Chalandri, a municipality in the northern part of the Athens metropolitan area in Greece, with an estimated population of 80,000 residents. A range of social initiatives and civic associations in this area address diverse urban concerns, including the deterioration of public health services and local educational institutions, environmental degradation, the scarcity of green areas and public spaces, and growing housing insecurity. In addition, many groups focus on animal welfare, particularly the care of stray animals, as well as on providing support to vulnerable populations such as refugees, migrants, and incarcerated individuals (Municipality of Chalandri, n.d.).

The collectives included in this study were selected on the basis of their sustained and publicly visible activity over many years, which is recognised by local society, while many of their key players maintain an active presence in the Municipal Council of Chalandri, indirectly representing their collective. The selection therefore seeks to elucidate the principal dynamics and learning outcomes that emerge within such initiatives, rather than to offer a comprehensive account of all local collectives:

- *Association for the Protection of the Environment and Creek of Penteli-Chalandri.* Founded in 1990, this association aims to preserve the Creek which crosses Chalandri in its natural state, preventing interventions that would alter its character as a green lung for the surrounding regions. It is an environmental social collectivity with continuous significant activity (SosRematia, 2025).
- *Social Solidarity Clinic of Chalandri:* Established in 2015 during the economic crisis, this collective has remained continuously active. It operates through the voluntary contributions of doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists, and dentists. Its mission is to offer free healthcare services – without discrimination – to the poor, the uninsured, and all individuals in need within the local community **(**Municipality of Chalandri, 2025).
- *Association of Volunteer Friends of Animals of Chalandri.* This organisation has been active since 2000, dedicated to protecting local stray animals and advocating for animal rights more broadly. It acts as a social movement by bringing individuals together around a shared cause, employing diverse strategies to challenge societal norms, and aiming to transform existing economic and cultural systems (Chalandri Animals, n.d.).
- *The Citizens' Network Think-Act-Left:* A distinctly political social movement established in 2023 with the goal of developing a new left-wing political agenda that responds to current social and political challenges. Within the scope of its initiatives, the collective holds bazaars to gather essential goods for socially marginalised populations, such as incarcerated women with young children, refugees, migrants (Think & Act Left, n.d.).

Our research aimed to explore participants' motivations for engaging in collective actions, the knowledge and skills they perceived themselves to have gained and the processes through which they acquired these competencies.

From each of the four collectives included in the study, two individuals were selected using a simple randomisation procedure from a pool of consistently active members who had indicated both willingness to participate and availability for in-depth interviews, yielding a total sample of eight participants. Therefore, the participants in this study constitute a purposive (judgmental) sample**,** a form of non-probability sampling in which individuals are deliberately selected based on predefined criteria that align with the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Unlike random sampling, which seeks statistical representativeness, purposive sampling targets individuals whose characteristics and experiences can most effectively illuminate the research focus (Patton, 2015). Accordingly, participants were selected for their knowledge, engagement, and capacity to articulate insights, experiences, and emotions relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Although this approach limits generalisability, it is methodologically appropriate for studies seeking in-depth understanding from a specific subgroup – such as activists within social movements – where analytical relevance outweighs demographic breadth (Patton, 2015). As a researcher, I approached the field as both an observer and a participant with prior familiarity with the collectives, a position that offered valuable contextual insight but also required ongoing reflexivity to remain aware of how my assumptions, relationships, and commitments shaped the research process and interpretation.

The individuals who finally participated in our study were between 45 and 65 years old, possessed a higher-education background and were either currently employed or retired. It is important to note that the participants were selected through a random sampling process within each collective and can be regarded as representative of the

residents of Chalandri – the area in which this research was conducted – a district of Athens predominantly inhabited by middle- and upper-income, middle-aged, and highly educated individuals.

A thematic analysis approach, employing data collected through semi-structured interviews, was adopted because, according to the literature, allows researchers to explore how individuals make sense of their lives and the meanings they attach to their experiences, in this case learning (Cohen, et al., 2017). The interviews conducted between November 1, 2024, and January 31, 2025, were carried out in a supportive environment designed to ensure participants' comfort and promote trust, in line with established ethical standards of informed consent and confidentiality, thereby facilitating open dialogue and the uninhibited articulation of experiences and perspectives.

The experiences of the selected participants in our research are complex and multilayered, encompassing diverse dimensions of their engagement in collective activities. These experiences are deeply embedded within, and shaped by, the broader social and political contexts in which the participants operate. The challenge in analysing the empirical material from these interviews primarily lies in the attempt to understand and represent this complexity with authenticity, sincerity, and credibility (Mertens, 2010).

Data analysis

As previously discussed, the empirical material for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews in which participants reflected on their motivations for engaging in collective action and their perceptions of the knowledge and skills developed through such involvement.

The semi-structured interviews focused on three main questions: What motivated participants to engage in collective action? What forms of knowledge and skills do they perceive to have acquired through their involvement? And how do they describe the processes through which these were acquired?

The interviews were recorded and analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework as follows. Guided by the research questions recurring patterns of meaning, or *themes*, within data were identified in a deductive or top-down manner driven by our theoretical interest in the topic. A theme as put by Braun and Clarke (2006) 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (p. 82).

Combining deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches, our thematic analysis of the data was informed by a socio-cultural perspective that views learning as situated, dialogical, and shaped by the social contexts in which it occurs. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommended procedure, the thematic analysis proceeded through six sequential phases. In the first phase, interview transcripts were read closely to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences within collective action. In the second phase, initial codes were systematically generated to identify salient features of the data. These codes captured participants' reflections on their motivations for engagement, the practical knowledge and skills gained through participation, and the processes by which these competencies were developed. The coding process revealed a multifaceted pattern of learning emerging from participation in collective activities. Motivational dimensions were expressed through codes such as 'embodied solidarity', 'moral responsibility', 'reciprocal emotional benefit', and 'response to social injustice'. Early engagement was reflected in learning through action and perspective transformation. Impacts of participation encompassed both practical and socio-emotional domains, including acquisition of experiential knowledge, development

of empathy and adaptability, enhanced active listening, exposure to diversity, emotional fulfilment, formation of social bonds, civic awareness, broadened perspectives, and a sense of belonging and solidarity. Learning processes were reflected in codes such as critical self-reflection, emotional reappraisal, interpersonal understanding, social learning, self-directed engagement, and ethical awareness, highlighting the interconnection of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions in participants' transformative experiences.

In the third phase, preliminary themes were constructed by identifying patterns and relationships among the codes. These themes were then reviewed and refined in the fourth phase to ensure internal coherence, distinctiveness, and consistency with the study's research objectives. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the themes, which captured the central dimensions of the inquiry:

- Reasons motivating adults to participate in collective action**,**
- Knowledge and skills acquired through participation**,** including three sub-themes (practical and technical knowledge, social and communicative competencies, and political knowledge), and
- Processes of adult learning within collective action

Finally, the sixth phase entailed integrating the empirical findings with theoretical interpretation, linking participants' narratives to broader understandings of informal and non-formal learning within socio-cultural contexts.

This procedure ensured a focused yet interpretive thematic analysis, driven by our specific research objectives while allowing for rich, nuanced engagement with the interview data.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the themes identified are not rigidly distinct or mutually exclusive; instead, they frequently intersect and interact, reflecting the complexity and multidimensional nature of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Findings of adult learning in urban collective activities

Based on the thematic analysis, the main findings are presented below in a concise and structured manner. As mentioned, selected interview excerpts are included to illustrate each theme and support the conclusions drawn. To ensure anonymity, quotations are attributed using participants' first-name initials. This approach reinforces analytical credibility while centring participants' voices in the interpretation.

Reasons for participation in collective action

The findings of our research suggest two primary motivations behind individuals' engagement in the activities of the collectivities previously discussed: the expression of solidarity with people facing social, economic, or personal problems; and a strong desire to contribute positively to the local society and the common social good.

A number of our participants expressed the view that their involvement stems from a deep sense of empathy and moral obligation toward others, particularly those experiencing marginalisation or vulnerability. One participant remarked:

> I want to connect with other people, to fight for our rights. I feel that helping others makes you stronger. I start to understand the feelings of being in their situation – especially during

> a time of crisis, when I see a need for care everywhere: care for refugees, Roma people, migrants. To put it simply, I step into the other person's shoes. (K)

This statement illustrates how participation often adopts a form of embodied solidarity, where understanding and action go hand in hand.

The idea that social sensitivity should lead into action was a recurring theme in the words of the participants in our research. As another participant stated:

> It is not enough to be aware or concerned about the cause of a problem. I must actively work toward its solution to have peace in our mind. And in return, our actions come back to us as positive energy and a smile. (T)

This reflection encapsulates the reciprocal emotional dimension of engagement: giving back to the community not only helps others but also nourishes the self.

Several participants described their participation experiences as a potential source of personal transformation, as illustrated by participant R, who reflected:

> I feel fortunate to have had this experience. Every day I felt satisfied, even when I encountered deep suffering – poverty, illness, hardship. It fills me up. I feel useful. And through this, I found paths to do even more acts. (R)

Her words highlight how collective action can become a source of personal growth and a renewed sense of purpose.

Other interviewees described particular causes – such as animal protection, environmental degradation, poverty alleviation, and social inequality – that spurred them to take action, framing their engagement as a direct response to issues they perceived as urgent and meaningful.

One explained: 'I felt the need to do more for stray animals than just feel sad when I saw them wandering hungry in the streets' (H).This quote illustrates how moral discomfort can motivate individuals to move beyond passive concern to active engagement.

For certain participants, retirement – and the increased availability of time it afforded – played a significant role in enabling their engagement. As one participant shared: 'After I retired, I told myself that as long as I am strong and have free time, I will contribute wherever I can in our community' (R). These accounts reflect how different life stages can open up new opportunities for civic engagement.

It is worth noting that, while participants often acknowledged the personal rewards of their involvement, they consistently emphasised that such benefits were not the driving force behind their actions. As one put it succinctly: 'I became involved in the collective out of a desire to help others. The fact that I also gain something is undeniable – but this is never my motivation' (B).

Lastly, participant V offered a particularly rich reflection on the deeper personal and cultural dimensions of offering:

> For me, it is both a need and a desire to contribute in improving living conditions. It is the need to be part of a collective that places the 'we' above the 'I'. Maybe it comes from a kind of 'motherly' habit – to give to others while putting you aside. (V)

This testimony eloquently captures the layered motivations behind participation, blending personal values, emotional needs, and social ideals into a coherent ethic of care and responsibility.

Especially compelling insights emerge from responses to the question, 'How did you learn about the movement before joining it?' which capture a *disorienting dilemma* and in and in one respect a *perspective transformation*, two interrelated key points in transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006).

A participant in Think-Act Left Movement recounts:

> One day, while waiting at the bus stop, I saw a poster calling for a meeting about police brutality and the rule of law. I went out of curiosity, expecting loud speeches, but instead, I heard neighbors – people I recognised – sharing real stories of injustice. That's when I understood: real change is not a politician's promise, it is us, coming together in our community to learn and act. (T)

This person approaches a meeting out of curiosity, anticipating 'loud speeches' but instead encounters familiar neighbors sharing authentic experiences of injustice. This unexpected shift challenges prior assumptions about how change happens and who drives it. The realisation that 'real change is not a politician's promise, it is us' was something akin to a 'perspective transformation', as the participant in our study moves from viewing political action as external and institutional to recognising the agency of ordinary people within their community. Another participant involved in the Protection of the Environment Association narrates

> One afternoon as I was walking by the creek, I noticed a group of people cleaning it and holding signs. Curious, I asked what was going on. They explained they were working to protect the creek and invited me to join their movement. In that moment, I did not even hesitate – I knew I had to be part of it. (E)

What begins as curiosity about people cleaning the Creek becomes an immediate recognition of shared responsibility and agency 'I knew I had to be part of it'. This moment exemplifies how unexpected, community-based experiences can trigger perspective transformation and foster new commitments to collective action.

Knowledge and skills acquired via collective action participation

Our analysis identified three primary domains of knowledge and skills that participants perceived they have acquired through their involvement in collective activities: (i) practical or technical knowledge, (ii) social and communicative competencies, and (iii) political knowledge, in a very broad sense.

Practical or technical knowledge

Practical or technical knowledge refers to skills that enable participants to carry out the necessary tasks in order to advance the objectives of the collective initiatives. These include digital literacy, media skills, financial management, events organisation, effective communication, publicity techniques, and social networking. As various scholars have pointed out (e.g., Walter, 2007), such knowledge empowers participants in a movement not only to act more effectively but also to question dominant hegemonic or *common-sense* ideologies, fostering the creation of alternative meanings rooted in collective identity.

One participant illustrated this by reflecting: 'I do not underestimate the skills I developed through formal education, but real learning happened to me through experience, socialisation, and the shared realities within the group' (H). Another described the practical benefits of this engagement: 'In the Solidarity Clinic we learned a

lot we did not know – about substances, medication, scheduling, appointments... there was a local supportive network that provided donations in pharmaceutical and medical materials, even money' (K). Managing funds was another critical learning experience:

> I had financial responsibilities in the collectivity. I had to keep careful records, write everything down – how much I paid, how much I received, how much balance is. It was my first time I had to manage money, and I learned everything an accountant should know. (K)

Social and communicative competencies

Social and communicative competencies are integral to fostering sustained participation and cohesion within collectives. They include enhanced awareness of social, political, and economic structures, the cultivation of empathy toward the struggles of others, and the development of critical consciousness. This critical awareness enables participants to examine systemic injustices and understand the root causes of social problems. Through exposure to diverse perspectives, individuals challenge dominant narratives and begin to articulate alternative interpretations of their social reality. One participant recalled: 'I learned to adapt my behaviour according to each person in need or elderly person's personality, which extended to every aspect of my life' (T). Another interviewee noted: 'I learned to be patient, to listen' (H). These interactions also expanded their understanding of the experiences of socially marginalised people: 'I saw another side of reality – I met people and faced problems I had never known about, like teenage mothers or individuals recently released from prison' (R).

Engagement also had emotional and relational impacts: 'It filled me with joy and optimism. It taught me that there are no dead-ends. You can always do something – big or small – for many people or for few' (K). Participants frequently spoke of the deep social bonds that they created through their participation in the collective actions: 'I made connections, met amazing people… all different, but everyone found a way to help. I formed strong ties, as if we had known each other for years' (V).

Political knowledge

Political knowledge, in a broad sense, acquired through collective action helped participants 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. As our findings indicate, participants developed the ability to identify and address social problems and to situate their personal experiences within wider structural contexts.

As one interviewee described: 'I learnt through real-life cases. I felt immersed in what is happening around me – it is not just personal, it is social. I want to contribute not just to my family, but to society' (F). Another participant, until that time socially withdrawn, reported a significant shift: 'I used to not even greet people living next door… Now I speak to people who come here, I have conversations; I listen to their problems and efforts, which I had never imagined' (K).

Such a shift in perspective often culminated in a deepened ethical commitment: 'There is so much suffering around us. Can we truly be well when the person next door is in pain? That became my motivation – that we should all be well' (R).

Finally, apart from these specific domains of learning, participants described acquiring more generalised forms of knowledge that led to personal transformation or a shift in life orientation. This knowledge often transcends traditional categorisations of learning. 'I cannot say I learned something entirely new, but I did get to know myself

better and developed self-esteem through my involvement' (K). Another participant expressed this as: 'I would call them life lessons. I cannot pinpoint exactly what I learned, but I know the experience made me stronger' (T). Other participants noted a broadening of their perspectives: 'A whole new world opened to me. I learned a lot, even though it is hard to say exactly what or where' (V). Social belonging was also a key outcome of their participation in a social collectivity: 'As someone new to the city, I needed social connection – and I found it. I made friends among the volunteers, and we are still in touch' (F).

These insights illuminate the multifaceted nature of learning within collective actions, demonstrating that such experiences transcend the mere acquisition of functional competencies to encompass the development of critical awareness, enhanced social and interpersonal connections, and profound personal transformation. Participants' reflections indicate that engagement in collective activities can foster heightened self-awareness, resilience, and an expanded sense of agency, while also broadening ethical and social perspectives and reinforcing the significance of communal solidarity and belonging. Thus, learning in such contexts is both cognitive and affective, influencing not only individuals' capacities but also their identities and their ways of relating to others and to society at large.

Processes of learning within collective action

An exploration of how participants in collective activities acquire knowledge reveals two distinct, yet interrelated, processes: critical reflection and emotional engagement. Brookfield (2010) has extensively analysed critical reflection as a fundamental process in adult learning, through which adults analyse and challenge assumptions, beliefs, and social structures that influence their thinking and behavior. He has also argued that critical reflection is not merely a learning technique, but a *practice of freedom* that helps adults becomes more critical and creative citizens.

This approach follows a pattern that is broadly similar to Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning, highlighting comparable processes wherein individuals fundamentally alter deeply held perspectives through critical self-examination.

In the context of social movements, learning often stems from reflective engagement with transformative practices. As Melero and Gil-Jaurena (2019) suggest, such self-reflective processes enable participants to question, revise, and develop new knowledge and behaviors aligned with collective goals. One participant echoed this sentiment by stating: 'I reached the age of fifty and then realised what truly empowers me, and everything I've learned has ultimately become an asset in my life' (T). Another interviewee noted: 'I reassessed many things I had previously considered important in my life' (R). And a third one comments: 'I became more familiar with behaviors of people who used to be strangers to me… Now I try to understand the peculiarities of each one' (K).

Experiences of confusion, doubt, and challenge often prompt participants in social movements to critically re-evaluate their prior beliefs and attitudes, a process described in terms of emotional re-appraisal and shifts in perceived group norms and efficacy (Smith et al., 2021). The following quotes from interviews with our research participants are illustrative.

> At first, I thought change only came from politicians or big organisations. But being part of this movement, hearing real stories and facing tough questions, made me realise I had it wrong. I started questioning everything I believed about power, justice, and my own role in it all. (T)

> Seeing the damage done to the Creek is frustrating, and sometimes I feel angry about how long we have been ignored. But standing alongside others who care just as much gives me hope. In those moments, I realised we're not alone – and together, we can still make a difference. (E)

> I used to think protecting animals was just about kindness, but being part of this movement made me see it is also about justice and responsibility. It challenged everything I believed and pushed me to take real action. (H)

As evidenced by the interview responses mentioned above, critical reflection contributes not just to individual change but also to cultivating a collective mindset.

The variety of emotions that may arise during the learning processes offers different learning experiences to adults who learn through collective activities. Many researchers argue that emotions are one of the main factors affecting an individual's learning process (Dirkx, 2008). These findings remain valid irrespective of the distinction between the emotional experiences adults encounter in learning contexts and those arising in their everyday social interactions (Zembylas, 2007).

Analysis of participants' experiences suggests that the emotions influencing their learning processes were primarily triggered by their cognitive appraisal of each activity.

Specifically, participants interpreted the relevance, difficulty, and alignment of these activities with their personal goals and prior experiences, which in turn influenced their emotional responses and level of engagement in learning. These findings align closely with Dirkx's (2001) analysis of adult learning. Dirkx emphasises that emotions are integral to the construction of meaning, arising from learners' active interpretation and imaginative engagement with their experiences. This theoretical perspective supports the notion that emotions in adult learning are not incidental but are deeply intertwined with how individuals make sense of and find significance in their learning contexts (Dirkx, 2001). As one participant exemplified:

> And beyond the good I do for others, I will also be doing good for myself. The very feeling, the emotional satisfaction that I receive through giving, is crucial for my self-esteem. Knowledge, experiences, connections, recognition, love, satisfaction. I will offer a lot – and receive even more. (E)

Another participant reports her emotions arisen when she relates to others: **'**Although the people we served were poor, uneducated, and worn down, they are marked by kindness and dignity' (R). The emotional intensity involved in these contexts can profoundly shape how adults experience and assimilate new knowledge. As one participant exemplified: 'Even the most committed volunteer as me needs to hear a thank you, a well done. Yet, despite disappointment or lack of recognition, I keep going on … because that's what I wish to do' (H). Such expressions highlight how emotional experiences – ranging from fulfilment and solidarity to frustration and exclusion – become formative learning events. The emotional dimension is not merely incidental. Numerous researchers affirm that emotions are central to adult learning, as they influence motivation, perception, and cognitive processing (Dirkx, 2008).

Participants also reported potentially transformative experiences in their relationships with others and in their internal states of mind. 'I became more familiar with behaviors that used to make me uncomfortable. Now I try to understand each person's uniqueness' (K). 'My contact with nature makes me calmer, but also more independent, I believe, because its laws apply everywhere in life' (E). These insights suggest that

emotional engagement promotes empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal growth, all of which are integral to the learning process (i.e., Atta & Holst, 2023).

Another significant mechanism traced in our research is learning through social interaction. In such settings, participants acquire knowledge by observing and collaborating with more experienced members. This informal mentorship, coupled with self-directed learning – through study and dialogue with peers – enhances participants' capacity for independent thought and collective problem-solving. One participant explained: 'I like to "take" from others what I do not know – to be influenced by people I admire for their character or psyche. Imagine – I never used to approach animals, and now I have a cat in my house' (F). Notably, within this context, participants in the collective activity demonstrate an increasing ability to self-regulate their learning processes. As one participant observed, 'I once waited for direction, uncertain of my own voice or next steps – but now, I seek answers with others or take the initiative to find them myself' (R). These self-directed strategies were frequently strengthened through involvement in non-hierarchical, participatory structures that fostered collective responsibility and mutual support. Within this setting, participants described shifts in their reference frameworks, prompting them to reconsider assumptions about leadership, activism, and solidarity. As one participant explained, 'Without a designated leader, we all shared knowledge – making it easier to learn together' (R), while another reflected, 'Since no one was in control and each of us contributed to every task, mutual learning came naturally' (B).

These overlapping processes of cognitive analysis, emotional investment, and social learning cultivate a rich, multi-dimensional learning environment. And beyond technical skills, it is the human dimension that often leaves the most profound impression: 'The people who accepted our help were genuinely grateful, often offering their skills and knowledge because they wanted to feel useful and give something back. They shared what little they had, and their generosity was a powerful life lesson' (K).

Finally, experiences with nature also emerged as learning catalysts, contributing to a deeper sense of inner calm and autonomy. One participant noted: 'Being in touch with nature makes us more peaceful and more independent. Its laws apply everywhere in life' (E).

In sum, learning within collective action emerges through a constellation of interrelated processes – critical reflection, emotional engagement, social interaction, and experiential learning – which together foster both personal transformation and collective empowerment. Participation in such initiatives transcends the act of offering help; it becomes a dynamic journey of self-discovery and growth that deepens individuals' understanding of themselves, others, and broader societal structures.

The participants' reflections illustrate that collective action fosters empathy, solidarity, and a heightened sense of social responsibility, particularly through interactions with marginalised communities. Experiential learning enhances practical competencies – such as healthcare assistance, financial management, and organisational skills – while also cultivating communication abilities, including patience, adaptability, and active listening in diverse contexts.

Moreover, collective action functions as a forum for political learning, heightening participants' awareness of systemic injustices, promoting civic engagement, and encouraging a re-evaluation of personal values. The development of critical consciousness through this process often leads to increased self-awareness and transformative shifts in how individuals engage with their communities and approach social change. In essence, learning within collective action is multidimensional,

encompassing emotional, practical, social, and political aspects. It not only fosters individual development but also strengthens active citizenship (English & Mayo, 2012).

Concluding comments: Adult learning flows into and from social collectivities

This study explored how adults acquire knowledge and skills through engagement in social collectivities and movements, highlighting the informal and non-formal learning dynamics inherent in collective practice. Although the study was not intended to produce universally applicable findings, its insights are firmly grounded in the lived experiences of individuals participating in diverse forms of collective action.

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. These disorienting moments, frequently accompanied by perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997), marked turning points in participants' understanding of their actions and roles within the collective.

Contemporary urban social movements, unlike traditional forms of mobilisation such as labor movements, exhibit a decentralised and pluralistic character. They synthesise diverse motivations, ideologies, and experiences, transforming everyday struggles into opportunities for learning and agency (Psimitis, 2017). In this sense, social movements function not only as agents of social change but also as living spaces of adult education (Jesson & Newman, 2004).

In the Greek context, initiatives such as citizens' cooperatives, community kitchens, barter networks, self-managed spaces, and environmental or anti-fascist movements exemplify how collective action operates simultaneously as a field of practice and as a form of pedagogy. Knowledge within these collectivities is constructed from below – through participation, dialogue, and shared experience – rather than transmitted from above.

Our findings reveal that learning unfolds through a series of interconnected phases encompassing the periods before, during, and after participation. Prior to engagement, learning emerges through processes of awareness and critical questioning; during participation, it develops through lived practice and collaborative interaction; and following engagement, it continues through reflection and the envisioning of future action. Participation in social collectives fostered evolving relationships between individuals and collectivities, shaping both personal and collective identities. This was vividly expressed in many of the participants' research narratives.

Our research findings also highlight instances in which collective engagement transforms participation into a process of learning. Through dialogue and collaboration, participants convert experience into shared knowledge, fostering the co-creation of understanding. In this way, participation influences not only the actions undertaken but also the interpretive frameworks and identities through which individuals make sense of those actions.

From such a perspective, learning in social movements is best understood as an interactive process shaped by the dynamic interplay between individuals and their social environment. It is through this interaction that experience is transformed into knowledge, underscoring the social and dialogical nature of adult learning within collective contexts. Social movements seem therefore to be not merely vehicles for social transformation but

also dynamic educational spaces where citizenship, identity, and agency are continuously negotiated and redefined.

Ultimately, this collective engagement – through which the notion of *we* is redefined – serves as a catalyst for individual learning processes and positions social movements as critical sites for the production and dissemination of knowledge. In this context, adult education and social movements converge within a shared space where knowledge understood as a socially constructed phenomenon flows within and among individuals, emerging from lived experience and returning to it in a continuous cycle of collective meaning-making.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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The role of learning and education in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers

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Abstract

Due to increasing precarisation, trade unions face challenges of organising young and precarious workers. Although research informs of innovative union strategies in this regard, there is a gap in understanding the role of learning and education in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on industrial relations and adult education scholarship to examine a case study of innovative strategies of the Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP) that has since 2011 operated in Slovenia. Findings show that dialogical approaches to education played a crucial role in the establishment and development of TUYP and its innovative proactive fieldwork and communication tactics, which increased unions' dialogical capacity to engage with, organise and unionise young and precarious workers, and ultimately also led to the transfer of knowledge from TUYP to the wider trade union movement. The article shows that dialogical approaches to education are a necessary prerequisite for organising and unionising young and precarious workers and for revitalising trade union organisations.

Keywords: workers' education, radical adult education, dialogical education, trade unions, young and precarious workers

Introduction

This paper is responding to calls to debate ways in which we can understand the relationship between social change and adult education and learning. In the context of growing precarisation and linked challenges for organising, it explores the role of adult education and learning in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers. While a growing industrial relations literature examines and has identified innovative union strategies to organise these workers (Keune & Pedaci, 2020; Samaluk & Greer,

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2021; Tapia & Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019), there is a gap in understanding how trade unions actually learn to enter in dialogue, raise class and political consciousness amongst young precarious workers and transfer this knowledge within the wider trade union movement.

This paper addresses this gap by drawing also on radical adult and workers' education literature (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022; Sauviat, 2015) to explore a case study of an innovative hybrid Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP) that was established in 2011 within the largest Slovenian trade union confederation. TUYP has since evolved from an experimental project into a sustainable trade union organisation that utilises education and learning to provide a bridge between youth, precarious workers and trade unions. The paper is structured as follows: first the conceptual framework is introduced; this is followed by the presentation of the case study and methods used. Then the findings section is presented and finally the findings are summarised and discussed.

Education and learning in the trade union movement

Radical adult education

Education and learning have always been at the core of the trade union movement, whose aim is not only to represent the interests of workers, but also to educate workers to strengthen their capacities and empower them to transform society (Sauviat, 2015). Trade unions are thus important actors in developing and practicing workers' education, which can broadly be defined as a 'sector of adult education which caters for adult in their capacity as workers and especially as members of workers organisations' (Hopkins, 1985, as cited in Sauviat 2015, p. 8). Much workers' education is based upon a radical adult education philosophy that first developed within the so-called old movements and trade unions that started emerging at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century to raise working-class' political consciousness and empower them to struggle for their rights (Kump, 2012). Philosophical foundations of radical adult education are grounded within Marxist traditions and especially the works of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire, who were active within labour and literacy movements, and argued that education is never neutral but linked to hegemonic struggles that demand raising political consciousness of workers' and other oppressed groups in order to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles and transform societal structures of oppression (Sauviat, 2015; Kump, 2012).

Inherent in Gramsci's concept of hegemony is the struggle for power that is not only maintained through force, but mainly through ideological means, the so-called cultural hegemony that maintains power by gaining consent for dominant ideas, which are reinforced by dominant cultural, religious and educational institutions (Kump, 2004). The concept of hegemony thus presupposes an educational relationship in which people learn to accept dominant norms and practices (Brookfield, 2005). Since hegemony is based upon consent, there is always also room for counter-hegemonic struggles that can challenge unequal power relations. Gramsci positioned these struggles within Marxist conflict theory and argued that working class needs to learn to think critically about power and control and develop working-class consciousness to organise for political transformation (Brookfield, 2005). For that working class needs to create its own 'organic intellectuals' - activists and persuaders, who would become cultural, educational workers and/or organic trade union leaders that would spread working class culture amongst masses and work with and on their behalf (Sauviat, 2015; Kump, 2004¸ Brookfield, 2005).

His philosophy of practice that took place in study circles, clubs and communities connected to working class political organisations and trade unions was thus crucial for development of radical adult education theory and practice (Kump, 2004).

Influenced by Marxist, including Gramsci's ideas, also Freire struggled for emancipation of the oppressed groups through education, by focusing on raising political consciousness about dominant hegemony and developing counter-hegemonic struggles. However, unlike Gramsci, Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy did not only focus on the working class, but spoke in general of oppressed groups. He argued that oppressors normalise unequal power relations through consent to hegemonic ideas, many of which are being (re)produced through education. Freire thus critiqued the 'banking' approach of mainstream education, which he identified as an instrument for oppression, where teachers act as depositors to provide 'common sense' knowledge and pupils act as depositories that uncritically receive and adopt such knowledge. In opposing the 'banking' approach to education, Freire (2000) advanced a dialogical, problem posing, education, where the oppressed can gain political consciousness of the world and their situation within. Freire's critical literacy programs were thus not just about educating people *how to read the word* but *how to read the world* (McLaren, 2021).

Through a dialogical approach education becomes the practice of freedom, which is grounded in the recognition that people and their world are inter-dependent (Freire, 2000). Furthermore, a dialogical approach also breaks the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and turns both into critical co-investigators, who learn from each other and can thus also take the role of one or the other (Freire, 2000). While Freire's general view of oppression underplayed class analysis crucial for critical workers' education, Gramsci paid little attention to the pedagogical role of organic intellectuals in the development of counterhegemony (Schugurensky, 2000). In their shortcomings a dimension of complementarity emerges that is relevant also for contemporary workers' education centred around raising political and class consciousness, the making of organic intellectuals and organising increasingly precarious workers and wider social groups to challenge hegemony and transform society (Sauviat, 2015; Schugurensky, 2000).

The work of the above-mentioned thinkers also shows that radical adult education works particularly well in periods of change in the mode of production or of political transition (Walters, 1989, and Mayo, 2006, as cited in Sauviat, 2015). In such times political education can move from a single organisation or group to other proletarian organisations/groups or social movements of oppressed groups that can together form 'an historical Block' to counter hegemony and achieve social transformation (Sauviat, 2015, p. 21).

Weakening of trade unions under neoliberal globalisation

The history of European labour movements shows that unions became stronger in the aftermath of the 2nd World War and with the development of socialist and Keynesian welfare states. This was soon challenged by neoliberal globalisation that weakened the trade union movement in the West and in post-socialist states and caused its move away from radical adult education traditions (Kump, 2012). Workers' education thus shifted towards delivering and encouraging policies of life-long learning and skill acquisition enabling union members to survive and develop in the capitalist labour market (Holford, 2009). Here we also see that workers' education can have different goals and objectives that change over time. These can be instrumental or transformative and thus range from raising class consciousness, action and social transformation, to providing stability and coherence to society, and focus on individual development, improved socio-economic

contributions from the workers and the development of workers' organisations and their capacities (Cooper, 2007; Sauviat, 2015).

The hegemony of contemporary global neoliberalism is also constantly disrupting modes of production and causing cyclical political, social, economic and environmental crisis. Consequently, it increases the precarisation of workers that is characterised by unstable working, employment and living conditions. This produces new challenges for the trade union movement on how to engage and organise growing precarious workers, whose temporary work or non-work statuses hinder access to workplace trade union structures, and the next generation entering these volatile labour markets (Keune & Pedaci, 2020; Smith et al., 2019). Moreover, it opens questions regarding (young) precarious workers' education. By drawing on contemporary radical adult education scholarship, we can see that increasingly precarious populations are putting forward new demands and are practicing a more inclusive radical adult education through horizontal and direct forms of democratic action and mobilisation that also stimulate new spatial and organisational forms (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012). With regards to the latter, we are for instance witnessing the emergence of new social movements, self-organised groups and grassroots indie and hybrid unions that engage with non-unionised precarious workers and wider social groups in transitions, are co-led by young, precarious and migrant workers and are centred upon mutual learning and building 'communities of struggle' from which collective sense of injustices and organising emerges (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012; Però, 2020; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022).

Nevertheless, traditional trade unions are still facing various challenges to reach and organise precarious workers and the next generation, and there are several explanations of what creates the divide between established unions and these workers. These include flaws in union strategy and their inadequate engagement with workers and their communities, young and precarious workers might not self-identify as workers or might occupy precarious legal and social statuses that prevent them from entering unions, cultural clashes and conflicts in their encounters with unions or workers' precarious lives and their exclusion from the workplace, occupational and wider community (Holgate et al., 2018; Però, 2020; Piore & Safford, 2006; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Tapia, 2013). Although not explicitly pointing this out, this industrial relations scholarship also indicates that trade unions often lack knowledge on how to approach, start a dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers. While this scholarship also identifies innovative union strategies to organise young and precarious workers (Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Tapia & Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019), there is a gap in understanding how trade unions actually learn to enter in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers. This article addresses this gap by exploring the role of education and learning within contemporary trade union movement.

Trade union movement learning and education

Within social movements, generally two main forms of education prevail. The first is external education aimed at the general public, politicians and other actors and comes in the form of various public engagement or public protests and the second is internal education that takes place within social movements (Kump, 2012), including trade union movements and their trade union organisations. Radical (workers) education can thus on the one hand focus on external education to establish a dialogue, raise awareness amongst non-unionised workers and wider social groups and create political pressure. External trade union education can thus also act as a public pedagogy that can work at the intersection of education and politics and can enact new 'concerns for the public quality

of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to become public' (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). External trade union education can thus enact new public concerns regarding emerging labour issues. By bringing precarity, prolonged youth transitions or vulnerability of migrant workers into the public and political agenda, unions help broaden the public understanding concerning these issues, stimulate wider mobilisation and also improve the public image of trade unions (Samaluk, 2017).

On the other hand, it can focus on internal education that is linked to learning and knowledge transfer within (trade union) movements (Kump, 2012) and trade union organisations. The aim of workers' education is therefore also to develop trade union organisations and increase their capacities to address new and emerging challenges (Sauviat, 2015). Research on organisational learning in trade unions shows that apart from learning related to solving problems and learning how to learn to find solution to new and emerging problems, learning within trade unions also involves critical scrutiny and redefinition of unions' existing learning strategies and structures, and ultimately of their understanding of trade union organisations (Zoll, 2003, as cited in Hyman, 2007). With regards to the later it is important to take into account trade unions' democratic rationale, internal diversity and potential conflict over organisational identity and purpose, which may in the dialectical process of learning promote reflection and learning rather than hinder them (Huzzard, 2001, as cited in Hyman 2007). In this reflection unions can uncover their hidden knowledge and unlearn their conventional knowledge and routines that is often needed in strategic innovation. Research shows that in order for reflection to occur, unions must increase their 'dialogical capacity' (Culpepper, 2002, as cited in Hyman 2007, p. 204) through intra- and inter-union communication channels and must become 'discourse organisations' (Zoll, 1991, as cited in Hyman 2007, p. 204). As such labour movements also have the potential to become incubators of new knowledge and to expand new and alternative knowledge and understanding (Kump, 2012). Internal learning and education within trade union organisations is also needed to enact a public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012) that is able to interrupt traditional trade unions' lack of engagement with the wider public and non-unionised workers.

This article explores the role of education and learning within contemporary trade unions facing challenges to engage with young and precarious workers by asking the following questions: 1) What role does learning and education play in the establishment and development of innovative trade union practices to enter in dialogue, engage with and organise young and precarious workers? 2) What learning and knowledge transfer can be observed among trade union organisations in relation to these innovative practices? 3) What are the wider transformative effects of these innovate trade union practices?

Case study and methods used

This paper presents a case study of a hybrid TUYP that emerged as a response to the effects of the 2008 economic crisis in Slovenia and has since greatly transformed workers' education and trade union organisations. Slovenia has been characterised by efficient welfare state institutions that were preserved during its gradual post-socialist transition, thus providing relatively stable employment and social security. During transition trade unions began to take over functions previously performed by the work councils and have then quite quickly in 1990's achieved a relatively high levels of density that lasted for more than a decade (Stanojević & Broder, 2012). This started to change with external pressures that came with its entry into the EU in 2004, the Eurozone in 2007 and the subsequent global financial crisis accompanied by more invasive EU governance. Through these external pressures Slovenian neo-corporatist model acquired features of

'competitive corporatism', visible in the policy of wage restraint, the intensification of work and increased pressures on the labour force (Stanojević & Broder, 2012). Moreover, the economic crisis brought to growth in precarious work and unemployment and had a particularly negative impact on youth transitioning from education to work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). This was combined with deunionisation trends and difficulties that unions faced in reaching the growing precarious workforce and those in prolonged transitions from education to work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Samaluk, 2017; Stanojević & Broder, 2012).

Apart from creating special structures for its younger members, Slovenian unions did not actively engage with youth transitioning between education and work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). Nevertheless, in these adverse conditions, combined with damaging governmental proposals for structural reforms to limit students' income, abolish student work and replace it with temporary and income-limited 'mini-jobs', youth started mobilising against these reforms (Samaluk, 2017). These unfavourable conditions combined with new opportunities to augment shrinking trade union resources by utilising EU funds, also led to the creation of new types of trade union practises and organisations that worked to revitalise trade unions through the innovative organisation of non-unionised (young) precarious workers and wider social groups (Samaluk, 2017; Samaluk & Kall, 2023). Amongst this was also the hybrid TUYP that is unique in its proactive organising approach towards non-unionised and non-represented youth occupying various precarious work, student or unemployment statuses. The hybrid TUYP, at the centre of this study, was established in 2011 as part of these efforts within the largest Slovenian trade union confederation, the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (AFTUS), which comprises of 22 affiliated trade unions mainly from the private, but also the public, sector.

This study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, including follow-up interviews, with nine TUYP activists and confederation and affiliated union's officials. This purposive sample was selected based on participants role in the TUYP, the confederation and some other affiliated unions and provided in-depth insights into innovative TUYP practices, learning, knowledge transfer and its transformative effects on confederation, its affiliates and the wider trade union movement. Moreover, organisational documents, such as yearly reports and programme guidelines and other material available on TUYP's and confederation's web and social media sites were also analysed. Initial fieldwork was done in Slovenia in 2015, followed by six new and follow-up interviews between 2017 and 2024. Interviews were carried out in Slovenian and were then transcribed and thematically analysed through the process of coding and categorisation of codes into relevant themes (Charmaz, 2006). Here presented data was translated into English. All quotes presented have been anonymised and are accompanied by the information on the year of the interview, interviewees' role in the TUYP or the confederation and any changes in their role over time.

The role of learning and education in the establishment and development of the TUYP

As mentioned earlier, youth started mobilising and self-organising due to growing crisis of youth unemployment and precarity. Their self-organising struggles included informal meetings between student organisations and trade unions, where they shared and discussed current problems and possible solutions related to the growth in non-standard employment and connected precarious education-to-work transitions of youth:

> In 2011[…] we started discussing what could be done to organise and unionise youth […] at that time there was a lot of talk about precarious workers on civil-law contracts and the fake self-employed […] and within our visible, starting environment, we talked about student work, students, pupils and the unemployed […] These are groups that could once become trade union members […] we all know that social dialogue is very important in Slovenia and if you want to be part of it, trade unions are your only option […] At that point we connected with AFTUS, because we had no experience […] we started discussing how to establish a trade union. (TUYP activist 1, 2015)

Adverse conditions thus stimulated informal dialogue between youth and trade union, which led to mutual learning and exposed the need to organise precarious and non-represented youth within trade unions. This dialogue led to the formation of an independent TUYP within AFTUS in 2011, which opened up to unrepresented young precarious workers and wider social groups (such as students and the unemployed) who often did not identify with and were not represented by the unions.

This initially experimental establishment of TUYP thus also opened Pandora's box for the internal learning needs necessary for the formation of new organic TUYP leaders:

> In the beginning, it was really an experiment […] No one took us quite seriously and we did not have any serious influence, I would say the first years, on the functioning of the association […]. Quite honestly. This also suited us, because you have to form yourself first. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024)

By becoming part of confederation, TUYP activists could fully utilise their newly gained access to internal and external trade union education organised within internal Trade Union Academy and the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI): 'We sent our activists on trainings of the confederation, and we very much utilised ETUI's trainings. Here I must emphasise ETUI's Young Trade union Leader's programme, which is the best, according to my opinion' (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). This internal and external trade union education thus mainly increased TUYP's general trade union capacities and enhanced activists' leadership skills. However, their know-how on how to engage and organise young and precarious workers developed mainly through learning by doing. This type of learning really became possible after TUYP was able to employ activists. Since the hybrid TUYP does not act as a representative trade union financed by membership, the ability to employ activist was closely linked to their innovative ways of tapping into alternative sources of funding:

> The first difference started to happen with the projects. We relatively quickly acquired the status of an organisation in the public interest in the field of youth work […] This is a very important thing in Slovenia, because it allows you at least one piece of funding that was stable […] you need some stability, to pay activists […] once we were able to hire at least for the duration of the project, our strength has increased. Not only within the union, but first of all in terms of content, when you have people employed, they can deal with these issues […] Then we started to build our expertise in terms of the content. That's when we increased our power, also towards confederation. Plus, when we had something to show. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024)

While the dependence on project funds also came with high risks linked to uncertain and temporary project funding, their unique status as a youth organisation and their increasing know-how to gain various divers project funds, provides a stable access to such funds (Samaluk & Kall, 2023) and thus also some stability in the making of organic union leaders and in maintaining the core activist base with unique expertise and know how on organising young and precarious workers.

Workers' education to establish a dialogue and organise young and precarious workers

Project funds also allowed TUYP to offer and organise awareness raising workshops on education-to-work transitions in secondary schools. Since education-to-work transitions became increasingly long and precarious due to economic crisis, these became a topic recognised and much welcomed by teachers, who wanted to aid their pupils:

> We started to offer education-to-work transition workshops for free […] and because the crisis was so big at that time, also teachers recognised this theme as essential to help their pupils with this transition […] then we started applying to projects that allowed us to do free workshops in schools […] And today TUYP has this network of schools and through that we managed to get trade unionism into the catalogue of compulsory elected subjects. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

With this innovative proactive fieldwork approach, the TUYP succeeded in bringing trade unionism into the educational field, which had previously been off-limits for trade unions: 'When we started, we wanted to get to youth and youth is in schools, however then no one at the confederation dared to think […] that we will ever have access to schools […] And we broke that wall' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Entering the educational field was a crucial turning point for unions as it allowed them to connect and engage in dialogue with previously unreachable youth and the next generation of workers.

Through educational activities in schools the TUYP raises awareness amongst pupils about 'precarious work, decent work, employment and social rights and trade unionism' (TUYP activist 3, 2024). TUYP awareness raising workshops organised in secondary schools are based on a dialogical approach and aimed at raising political and class consciousness amongst youth about risks at transitions and workers' rights. Youth employment related themes were also later included into the formal curriculum through the mandatory active citizenship content component in secondary vocational education programs (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2019). Consequently, the demand for TUYP workshops has increased enormously over the last two, three years and involves around 1000 pupils per year (TUYP activist 3, 2024). TUYP also cooperates with some higher education teachers and the public Employment Office and through these channels organises workshops for students in particular programs and subjects or for the unemployed. In their campaigns for internships in welfare professions, TUYP also organised campaigns, info points and events at faculties educating the next generation of welfare professionals (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). Moreover, they also use integral and EU project funds to develop other innovative, informal educational and experiential learning methods, such as for instance *Escape room against violations on the labour market*. This is a puzzle escape room game that simulates real encountered labour market violations, which participants have to deal with by discovering clues and accomplish tasks in order to fight violations and finally escape the room (Mladi Plus, 2022). By doing that the TUYP is advancing a dialogical, problem posing, education, where youth can gain political and class consciousness necessary to navigate transitions.

EU funded projects have also allowed TUYP to reach youth in different Slovenian regions, by doing workshops in schools and other places across Slovenia and by implementing a travelling trade union school. These educational activities aimed at raising youth's political consciousness about education to work transitions, discrimination on the labour market, the role of trade unions and youth activism:

> The two biggest things are that we are all over Slovenia […] and we are conducting a traveling trade union school […] a series of trainings, workshops […] where we teach young people about entering the labour market, then discrimination in employment, examine violations of job advertisements, then introduce them to trade unions - what they are, why they are important, what workers' councils are, then activism, youth participation, and at the same time, we have different specific content at each training in each region[…] Then, in all statistical regions of Slovenia, we also have trainings in secondary and vocational schools, where we focus more on entering the labour market. (TUYP activist 4, 2017).

With their travelling trade union school, the TUYP gained new members, as well as gained and trained new activists and developed regional councils:

> Project Signpost was aimed at gaining new membership, mainly activists, on local level and we succeeded […] now we started developing regional councils […] because we actually had the chance to go there, meet people, organise workshops and if anyone was interested introduce them [to trade union work]. (TUYP activist 5, 2017)

TUYP's radical adult education approach has played a crucial role in gaining new trade union members amongst non-represented and precarious youth. According to another activist each workshop brought approximately five new members (TUYP activist 4, 2017). As the economic crisis deepened, TUYP effectively addressed emerging needs by starting to engage also with older precarious workforce, which was rapidly aging out of the category youth due to prolonged precarity:

> We were supposed to cover youth up to the age of 35, but this age is increasing enormously […] We are thus approached by people, who identify with that and don't perceive us as a stagnant trade union […] and this is why a 37 or 38 old woman becomes a member of TUYP […] Youth Plus on the one hand means more active youth […] willing to change things and on the other it means not that young anymore. (TUYP activist 1, 2015)

Unlike traditional youth committees, where membership is based upon chronological age and worker status, TUYP regards youth as a social category that has increased enormously due to widespread precarisation. As such it also welcomes precarious 'youth plus' workers, who are unable to reach social adulthood due to persistent precarity, even though they have already passed the youth-normative chronological age.

Through their proactive fieldwork approaches TUYP activists also themselves learned about new types of precarious work and emerging platform workers. This consequently also informed and shaped their innovative and enduring proactive awareness raising tactics to enter in dialogue, engage with and gradually unionise platform workers:

> Each time we started communicating with them they wouldn't accept us. So, we needed a different approach. We looked for them, ran after them […] and did fieldwork research on their working conditions, started talking to them and offering them our services, but there was not much interest […] we also did a fieldwork campaign, where we offered them meal breaks, were fixing their bikes, offered them access to toilet, everything that should be provided by their employer […] and we offered them the right to organisation and representation […] we tried for three years to get to know them, to prove ourselves, to organise them […] This is proof that trade unionism is a long haul run. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

This case study shows that engagement with platform workers sparked mutual learning that pushed the TUYP to introduce innovative fieldwork approaches. These went beyond

mere proactive communicative tactics and demanded in-depth research and learning about platform workers conditions, which ultimately led to targeted campaigns that responded to the aspects of workers' rights disregarded by the above-mentioned food delivery platforms. This allowed them to enter in dialogue with platform workers and gradually built trust and class consciousness amongst them. This long process of conscientisation was a necessary precondition for their ultimate organising and unionising, which resulted in TUYP's new member section of over 150 platform workers. Dialogical approach to education can also be observed in TUYP's innovative communication tactics to reach and engage with youth through various communication and then relevant social media channels:

> It's crucial that you are everywhere […] We have Facebook, Twitter, webpage […] newsletter, in which we inform about our current wok. Since we are working with youth, this is key, as through these channels we get a lot of support from youth, they join, follow us. (TUYP activist 5, 2015)

Furthermore, these innovative communication tactics also allow TUYP to 'increase pressure, because we can show that we do work instead of others' (TUYP activist 2, 2015). In contrast to traditional trade union work, where there is mainly lobbying within social dialogue institutions, TUYP innovative communication tactics enable lobbying directly towards institutions by engaging in public debates. By doing so they show that public concerns related to class struggles can be exposed and negotiated through means other than the traditional protective institutions.

TUYP's use of various innovative communication channels and their increasing public and mass media exposure can thus also be viewed as a public pedagogy, which on the one hand enacts new concerns related to precarious work and youth precarity and on the other demonstrates that trade unions can be different and engaged with youth problems and youth struggles: 'Trade unionism can be different […] that they are not about old men on same positions for 30 years, but for young people wanting a better future and willing to fight for it' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Therefore, through its public pedagogy TUYP is also significantly changing the public image of trade unions, which are consequently also becoming much more inviting for youth and women:

> It is in the interest of trade unions to have visibly active young trade unionists […] Many times trade unions were perceived as some obsolete structures led only by old men and it is in their interest that they have young people appearing in public and clearly stating that they are trade unionists. (TUYP activist 5, 2017)

When TUYP started out trade unionism was not very popular amongst youth. However, its public engagement and public pedagogy, which enacted new public concerns related to youth and precarious workers, showed that trade unions can be different and can involve and work for the next generations and precarious workers.

Learning and knowledge transfer amongst trade unions

Initially there was quite some resentment within the confederation and affiliated unions towards TUYP, and it took a lot of time and effort before other affiliated trade unions recognised TUYP's innovative tactics and started learning about them. Gaining internal recognition involved a lot of internal communication to raise awareness about the need to organise young and precarious workers and to showcase TUYP's tactics to do so:

> When we organise an event, protest, make a statement […] we photograph everything […] I then create a short message and add photos. I have now started to send this also internally across confederation, so that they know what we do, that we get a positive response […] Then we started a survey amongst member trade unions, on how many young members they have, what they do for them, are they aware of precarity […] We will present this at the presidency of confederation and we will emphasize this gap, in a nice way. Trade unions are extremely traditional and unchanging institutions and this is visible in so many ways. One is this communication that is lacking internally, and non-awareness of the reality of workers, who are not employed members. There's a lot of sexism within. (TUYP activist 5, 2015)

Internal communication initially enabled TUYP to showcase their innovative trade union work and enter into dialogue with other affiliated trade unions. This gradually brought them sufficient legitimacy to research member unions' engagement with the next generation of workers and to identify gaps, which they needed to communicate in a manner that would be acceptable within quite traditional organisational culture. These tactics point to inward enacted public pedagogy aimed at the labour movement, which enacts new concerns and the need for trade unions to adopt new approaches and again return to radical adult education traditions, which demand 'a sort of militancy […] by putting activism up front' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

TUYP's public pedagogy enacted through internal showcasing of their innovative practices has brought them internal recognition that has consequently led to internal confederation's learning and education in the form of internal workshops and training:

> When we had something to show, this resulted in the fact that individual affiliates started to invite us. It started with trainings, workshops, when they saw that we have knowledge they lack. Social media were a breaking point; they opened the doors for us […] We were no longer an experiment. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024)

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 in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers and increase their general dialogical capacity towards existing and potential members. In the course of these efforts TUYP has designed a Handbook on how to get new young members and has then organised workshops for all affiliated unions to present this handbook and tactics to approach, include and involve the next generation in trade union work (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Their inward enacted public pedagogy has thus brought wider learning and knowledge transfer into the confederation and its affiliated unions.

As a result, some affiliated unions have started to cooperate closely with TUYP in order to utilise their innovative tactics and know how. Out of 22 affiliates TUYP cooperates closely with seven affiliates. These are mainly those working in sectors with growing precariousness, such as hospitality, transport, retail, education and those, where the leadership recognises TUYP's innovation: 'Those unions that noticed precarisation or worsened working conditions in their sectors […] or where leaders of trade unions were open for us and recognised that our innovation helps spread trade unionism' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). TUYP organises workshops and training for these affiliates, as well as cooperates with them in the field and in specific campaigns. Through these activities they transfer their knowledge and know-how on how to reach and engage with the next generation and increase trade union membership amongst youth (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024), what tactics to use to reach and organise atomised and mobile precarious workers (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024) and emerging platform workers (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1,

2024). Since the TUYP is not a representative, but a hybrid trade union working proactively to reach and organise young and precarious workers, it also acts as a bridge between these workers and trade unions and thus try to refer their existing and emerging precarious members over to affiliated sectoral unions (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Although some affiliates are still sceptical towards TUYP's hybrid status and tactics, there is a growing recognition within confederation and its affiliates of TUYP's important role in trade union revitalisation.

As a result, TUYP activists have also gradually begun to cover youth, precarious work, digitalisation and communication related educational themes within the confederation's internal Trade Union Academy (Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije, 2022) and became trainers for new activists (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). Moreover, TUYP also itself acts as producer of new generation activists and young union leaders and thus also acts as a pool from which other affiliated trade unions employ new activist and organic trade union leaders (Affiliated union official, 2019). Some former TUYP activists have consequently became employed within the confederation or some affiliated unions, where they are transferring TUYP's know-how related to 'communication, fieldwork, expert or legal services' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024) and as such make traditional trade union organisations more proactive and engaged with public pedagogy for all workers, not only their members.

Currently there are two former TUYP activists employed in the AFTUS confederation communications team, who are increasing the confederation's dialogical capacity by teaching affiliated unions how to renew and utilise their websites and social media to attract new and better engage with their existing members (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). They have also turned the confederation's website and social media into an effective information hub that can be utilised by members and the wider public (TUYP activist 1, 2015) and can increase affiliated unions and the confederations' public pedagogy efforts. These public pedagogy efforts were particularly visible during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when they reacted swiftly to provide all relevant information on their website regarding the changed workers' conditions and addressed inquiries of members and non-members alike, which consequently also increased membership (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). Another example of opening up to non-members and wider public are the newly introduced confederation's Open Days, happening on 1st May, international worker's day, that is also a public holiday in Slovenia. Open Days have been taking place yearly since 2019 and are aimed at attracting new members by opening to all interested workers and the wider public to inquire about workers' rights and trade unionism (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024).

TUYP's innovative tactics and their role in the wider transformation and revitalisation of the trade union movement also became recognised beyond Slovenian borders. TUYP is acting as an international example of good practice and engages in transnational partnership projects, where it transfers its knowledge and know-how to partner unions in many other European countries, amongst which are now also German and Austrian trade union confederations, Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB) and Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB):

> At international level they often approach us for training, they want us to share our know-how. We were approached by the main Austrian confederation ÖGB, so that ÖGB-Jugend, would come to us and that we show them, what we do. In June the delegation from DGB is coming, their youth division […] Very often we get calls, invitations that we introduce our good practices. (TUYP activist 3, 2024)

Moreover, TUYP's innovation and its production of trade unions' next generation organic union leaders has also been recognised at the EU level. Consequently, in 2019 the then TUYP leader, first became elected as the President of the Youth Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and in 2023 she became part of ETUC's leadership team. In a new role as ETUC's confederal secretary, that former TUYP activist is responsible for strengthening trade union youth structures and trade union renewal, which is closely connected to practices developed by TUYP:

> This renewal is often connected to things that we did at TUYP, so that you include new categories of workers, that you are open, that you have different communication approaches, that you modernise, that you address wider issues, that you strengthen internal structure and external recognition […] On the EU level TUYP is recognised as an example of good practice for various fields. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

In this new position a former TUYP activist is thus transferring TUYP's knowledge and know-how to the ETUC and its affiliated country confederations.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper explored the role of education and learning within the contemporary trade union movement in order to effectively engage with and organise young and precarious workers. It focused on a case study of TUYP that emerged in Slovenia as a response to the crisis prone growth of youth unemployment and precarity and has later become an important actor in the revitalisation of the wider trade union movement.

Findings show that education and learning played a crucial role in the establishment and development of TUYP and took place through informal dialogue, more formalised internal and external trade union education, as well as through their actual (field)work. Through these various forms of learning TUYP activists gradually developed into organic union leaders with unique expertise and know-how on how to engage and organise young and precarious workers. TUYP's activists thus also acted as 'organic intellectuals', who became educational workers reaching out and entering in dialogue with young and precarious workers. Their innovative proactive fieldwork tactics to reach young and precarious workers in domains with no trade union presence involved Freirean (2000) dialogical, problem posing, approach to education, where youth gained political and class consciousness. This dialogical education came in the form of awareness raising workshops in secondary schools, universities and other places where youth congregate, experiential learning methods and a travelling trade union school across Slovenia through which they also gained new members, as well as trained new activists and developed regional councils. Through their proactive fieldwork approaches TUYP activists also themselves learned about new types of precarious work and emerging platform workers, thus breaking the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and turning both into critical co-investigators (Freire, 2000).

These fieldwork approaches thus sparked mutual learning that brought to innovative trade union tactics that were gradually changing workers' class consciousness and ultimately led them to organise and unionise to challenge exploitative conditions. These findings again confirm that dialogical approaches to education can change workers' consciousness and can lead them to challenge hegemony and transform society (Kump, 2012; Sauviat, 2015) and are as such also a necessary precondition for organising and unionising precarious workers. The findings thus show that workers' education should not only cater for adults in their present capacity as workers and union members (Sauviat,

2015), but also in their future capacity as workers and potential union members, with whom unions must first engage in dialogue in order to organise and unionise them.

Findings show that dialogue has also increased through TUYP's innovative communication tactics, which have significantly boosted trade unions' dialogical capacity to engage with young and precarious workers, to build political pressures and ultimately to promote a public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012) that enacts new concerns related to precarious work and youth precarity and offers alternative ways to organise youth. All this has ultimately also contributed to improving the public image of trade unions and made them more inviting for young people. TUYP's innovative communication tactics were also crucial in establishing a dialogue with other trade unions about their learning needs. These tactics point to an inward enacted public pedagogy aimed at the labour movement, which on the one hand exposed the need for unions to learn new approaches to work effectively with young and precarious workers and on the other revealed a hidden knowledge existing within the TUYP, which brought to internal recognition and knowledge exchange.

Within the confederation's internal learning and education TUYP consequently took the role of an expert, transferring its knowledge and know-how to some other affiliated trade unions on how to enter in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers and how to increase their general dialogical capacity towards existing and potential members. TUYP is however not only an incubator of new knowledge and an advocate of radical workers' education traditions, but also acts as an entry point for new generation activists and is thus also producing trade unions' next generation organic leaders. This study not only confirms the findings of previous research that dialectical processes of learning promote reflection and learning within trade union organisations (Hyman, 2007), but also shows that it can contribute in important ways to the transformation of trade union organisations.

This study demonstrates that TUYP's innovative education practices grounded within radical adult education traditions have had some important transformative and revitalisation effects on the confederation, its affiliated unions, as well as the wider European trade union movement. TUYP is today recognised as having developed an international good practice and is consequently transferring its knowledge and know-how to trade unions across Europe. Findings thus confirm previous research (Sauviat, 2015) that radical workers' education is crucial in periods of economic and political crisis, where it can move from a single organisation to other union organisations and the wider labour movement to effectively address and challenge growing youth precarity.

Although limited in scope and size, this qualitative study points to the essential role of radical adult education in the contemporary trade union movement and shows that even a small trade union from the Central and Eastern European periphery that harnesses these radical workers' education traditions can have a significant transformative and revitalising impact on the wider European trade union movement.

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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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Beyond anthropocentrism: Rethinking adult education for an ecocentric and just future

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Abstract

This article argues for the urgent reorientation of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) from its dominant anthropocentric paradigm toward an ecocentric foundation. Adopting a critical and interdisciplinary approach, it engages with UNESCO global reports and prominent scholars from ALE and other fields of knowledge that highlight the need for fundamental shifts in educational paradigms. Drawing on environmental philosophy, decolonial thought, and ecological epistemologies, it interrogates the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning contemporary sociocultural and educational frameworks. Central to this discussion is the role of contemplative knowledge as a pathway to overcome disconnection, with attention to its assumptions, pedagogical approaches, and capacity to foster relational, embodied, and ecological awareness. The findings reveal emergent alternatives prioritising epistemic diversity, planetary well-being, and sustainability. By integrating contemplative practices with critical ecocentric perspectives, the article advocates a profound reimagining of ALE – one that transcends human exceptionalism, nurtures interconnectedness, and supports justice-oriented, sustainable, and resilient educational futures.

Keywords: adult learning and education, ecocentric epistemologies, contemplative knowledge, relational pedagogy, mindfulness as education

Introduction

From a critical and interdisciplinary perspective, it is of paramount importance to reassess the role of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) during pivotal moments of societal transformation – such as the one we are currently experiencing – and to examine the underlying ontological and epistemological conceptions. This work builds upon and advances an increasingly acknowledged shift towards renewed architectures of thought

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and consciousness, advocating for the reorientation of the field of ALE from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric vision. In line with this perspective, and as Vandenabeele et al. (2024) aptly observe, 'Adult Education can never be just about individual growth or fulfilment but always and above all about (shaping and caring for) a shared world' (p. 228). The central argument and overarching aim of this paper is to critically examine the necessity – and the pressing urgency – of ALE embracing an ecocentric conceptual foundation to inform its policies, goals, and educational practices. For this purpose, the article begins by examining the current civilisational crisis and its anthropogenic impacts, followed by a reflection on UNESCO's political voice regarding the need to overcome this crisis and an analysis of certain paradoxes within contemporary society. The discussion then addresses the ontoepistemological conceptions underpinning modern societies, followed by a discussion of possible societal pathways forward – specifically Degrowth and Eco-swaraj – before clarifying ALE's role in moving beyond anthropocentrism. The subsequent, more extensive section, articulated through four key sub-points, outlines a roadmap for transformation – a revolution grounded in ecocentric epistemology and ontology. Within this roadmap, we contend that the knowledge arising from contemplative traditions – although largely absent from ALE discourse, research, and practice – holds particular significance and transformative potential.

Civilisational crisis and anthropogenic problems

Growing social injustices worldwide, the massive destruction of biodiversity, ecosystem imbalances, mental health issues, and climate change are just some aspects of the civilisational crisis facing contemporary societies. The exponential acceleration of technology, with its dominant emphasis on production and consumption, increasingly pressures citizens to live frenetically, leaving little time for reflection. An increasing number of adults feel that action has become mere reaction – driven by daily demands, tight deadlines, and the relentless competition framed within the discourse of progress and development. This sense of exhaustion, both personal and planetary (Di Paolantonio, 2019), is accompanied by the pervasive feeling that 'there isn't enough time to do what must be done or what was planned' (Arocena & Sansone, 2020, p. 221), fostering disillusionment, fragmentation, and emptiness. As Holmqvist and Millenberg (2024) advocate, 'the fragmentation of existence reduces societal cohesion, alienating us from each other and our surroundings' (p. 300).

In this context, many scholars from ALE and other fields of knowledge highlight a profound structural distortion in the relationship between individuals and the world, particularly concerning the temporal dimension and daily rhythms of life. This distortion contributes to various forms of alienation (e.g., Escobar, 2018; Gadotti, 2005; Holmqvist & Millenberg, 2024; Lange, 2004; Latour, 2018; Maison, 2023; Misiaszek, 2023; Rosa, 2016). According to the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2016), technological acceleration and the imperative of competitiveness drive another form of acceleration – social acceleration – characterised by job insecurity, frequent changes in employment and residence, and the erosion of reference points, trust, and stability. For instance, as mentioned by Maksimovic (2024), 'the enormous problem of housing, demands constant readiness for relocation, potentially hindering a conscious effort to establish a sense of belonging' (p. 335). These phenomena foster a pervasive sense of uncertainty in what Rosa describes as 'a hyper-individualized, pathologically competitive environment that makes one feel that one has never accomplished enough' (Di Paolantonio, 2019, pp. 609-610). These postmodern characteristics of the Anthropocene era (UNESCO, 2018)

highlight human actions as a powerful force of socio-ecological degeneration disrupting planetary balance, creating a high-risk and destructive world that affects all living beings.

Emphasising the darker aspects of the Anthropocene, Carvalho (2024) argues that it 'is associated with a modern hubris that has disenchanted the world, instrumentalising it according to the dictates of rationalisation, and controlling it through multiple technologies and sociotechnical interventions that often give rise to "monsters" such as the climate crisis' (p. 78). Expanding on this argument, he asserts that 'we are currently witnessing the collapse of what [Thacker, 2011] calls the world-for-us, a planetary ontology conditioned by modern and anthropocentric frameworks, which falters in the face of the multiple and ambivalent expressions of non-human agency, shattering human exceptionalism' (Thacker, 2011, as cited in Carvalho, 2024, p. 94).

For scholars whose critiques stem from ecological economics, the environmental justice movement, and eco-Marxist analyses of social metabolism (e.g., Foster, 2022), the notion of economic growth without environmental destruction is an illusion. It is 'not sustainable and cannot be made sustainable by any other modulations of growth' such as the green industry or smart jobs (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 79)[1]. Regarding working life, a growing perception suggests that, for most people, 'work is neither creative nor fulfilling […] workers are thus turned into instruments; they function as a thing, not as a person' (pp. 106-107). David Graeber famously termed such roles 'bullshit jobs' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 107), performed under what Berardi (as cited in Di Paolantonio, 2019) describes as the *cognitariat* – workers engaged in fragmented cognitive tasks that serve the 'imperatives of semiocapitalism' (p. 606). This concept refers to the contemporary fusion of media and capitalism, which not only exploits natural resources but also commodifies human interiority – 'our soul' (p. 605) – by extracting passions, desires, and creative impulses as exploitable assets. Reinforcing this critique, Di Paolantonio (2019) further contends that:

> [T]oday we are compelled to hold jobs that cannibalize our lives all day long, as the informal nature of our schedules eludes our control and exposes us to the 24/7 flow of online demands […] always feeling the need to respond to the latest solicitations. (Di Paolantonio, 2019, p. 607)

While such concerns are not new within the critical radical debate in ALE (e.g., critical pedagogy, emancipatory education), raising awareness of these structural crises and its several interconnected layers underscores the urgency of challenging, rethinking, and transforming dominant ideologies, worldviews, and patterns of living. This imperative extends to the ways in which societies and educational structures socialise and educate individuals and communities.

A broader political voice: UNESCO global reports

Envisioned as a broad political voice, UNESCO's global reports are key documents shaping educational policies and goals internationally. In response to the so-called emerging *scientific and technical revolution*, its first report unequivocally asserted that education must cultivate the 'complete human being' (Faure et al., 1981, p. 10) within the framework of lifelong education, through the proposal of *learning to be*. The second report, published amidst a period of rapid neoliberal expansion, globalisation, and escalating socio-cultural complexity (Delors et al., 1996), articulates an educational vision rooted in lifelong learning and structured around four foundational pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. While these two reports exhibit certain divergences – most notably the subtle neoliberal influence

underlying the concept of lifelong learning in the latter – they share a distinctly humanistic foundation but also a pronounced anthropocentric orientation.

Only in its more recent world report has UNESCO explicitly recognised the urgent need for 'action to change the course of humanity and save the planet' (UNESCO, 2021, p. V). This report gives international visibility to philosophies and principles aimed at respecting the 'existence of all living beings on the planet' (p. V) while rejecting singular conceptions about the world (worldviews) and emphasising the importance of 'different epistemologies and ways of living' (p. 53). Accordingly, it highlights educational approaches[2] grounded in pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity, centred on 'sympathy, empathy, and compassion' (p. 53). This substantial shift contributes to a qualitatively distinct narrative that a growing number of ALE scholars are articulating (e.g., Vandenabeele et al., 2024) – one focused on redressing injustices and reversing the extensive environmental degradation caused by humankind. The 2021 UNESCO report also contends that contemporary dilemmas and challenges demand that 'a range of epistemic practices flourish in schools and that [broader and more constructive alliances] be formed between epistemologies and ecologies of knowledge' (p. 94). In this regard, it advocates for the *decolonisation of knowledge* particularly that which has historically shaped the culture of the *Global North* and that remains predominantly rationalist. Additionally, the report points towards the need to challenge entrenched dichotomies within Western intellectual traditions, such as 'theory and practice', 'individual and collective', and 'spiritual and material' (p. 124). It acknowledges that non-Western perspectives have played a crucial role in contesting these polarities, many of which are linked to knowledge systems that have been historically 'excluded from formal education' (p. 125), as we will reflect on later. According to UNESCO (2021), 'the world's most educated countries and people are the ones most accelerating climate change [… and] if being educated means living unsustainably, we need to recalibrate our notions of what education should do and what it means to be educated' (p. 33).

Paradoxes of the ideology of growth

> Without facing the ideology of growth head-on, we will not be able to manifest the radical transformation of society that we need. (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 28)

Indeed, it is precisely the wealthiest countries – where population growth is stagnating or even declining – that bear the greatest responsibility for the ecological crisis. The richest one per cent of the global population 'are responsible for over twice as many carbon emissions as humanity's poorest half' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 227). Drawing attention to *degrowth by design or by disaster*, these authors highlight a paradox identified as early as 1865 by William Jevons, stating that:

> [I]ncreasing the efficiency of energy and material use often leads to more, and not less, consumption of this energy or raw material [… and that] a rising number of empirical studies have shown how rebound effects [meaning excess demand due to an increase in productivity] counteract decoupling. (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 87)

For instance, although global energy intensity today is nearly 25% lower than in 1980, CO_2 emissions have nonetheless increased 'by more than 60 % since 1990' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 89).

Another paradox is the *happiness-income effect*, which suggests that beyond a certain income threshold, economic growth no longer leads to increased long-term well-being (Waldinger & Shultz, 2023). This raises a fundamental question: if a growth-driven

economy fails to ensure both social and environmental balance, then power structures and societal dynamics, including educational structures, must shift away from their dominant focus on economic expansion towards enhancing human wisdom and sentient well-being while actively reducing environmental harm. In other words, the priority must shift toward both social and ecological justice. Integral to this transformation is 'the weaving of a new narrative for education and literacy' (Ireland, 2023, p. 1), where action and reflection spring from the principle of 'the intricate entanglement and mutual interdependence of human and non-human entities' (von Kotze, 2024, p. 326). Within this context, the idea that 'more than ever, the choice is between degrowth – a multidimensional set of transformations based on sufficiency, care, and justice – or barbarism' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 21) is gaining increasing recognition.

The pressing challenges outlined above, along with their far-reaching implications, constitute a call to critically examine and transform the dominant sociocultural paradigm in western societies and educational structures. A deeper understanding of its prevailing epistemologies, ontologies, and purposes – combined with more systemic thinking and action aligned with radical sustainability – will be further explored. An alternative vision proposes the redesign of societies based on different sociocultural paradigms (Bertrand & Valois, 1994; Escobar, 2018). From the perspective of ecological humanism and Eastern knowledge systems (e.g., Henry Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Ivan Illich), which are rooted in a profoundly ethical approach to human experience (Varela, 1999), human beings are deeply interconnected with ecosystems. Even quantum physics acknowledges 'the deeply relational nature of reality' (Spretnak, 2011, as cited in Lange, 2018, p. 413), where the distinction between subject and object is considered a mere perceptual illusion.

Onto-epistemological conceptions prevailing in contemporary societies

A critical examination of the dominant worldview in contemporary societies reveals its foundation in specific ontological, epistemological, and functional conceptions that are deeply rooted in the notion of separation – between social classes, the natural and human worlds, subject and object, mind and body, among others. Our actions continue to be shaped by Cartesian habits, a set of dispositions embedded in dualistic conceptions (e.g., *res cogitans* and *res extensa*), an intellectual framework that perpetuates exploitative relationships – whether among people, between humanity and nature, or in the treatment of the planet itself, all of which are primarily viewed as objects serving dominant interests (Escobar, 2018). These relational dynamics stem from a 'narrative of disconnection' (Bainbridge & Nero, 2020, p. 49), deeply entrenched in Western civilisation and governed by a specific paradigmatic framework – what Bertrand and Valois (1994) define as a *sociocultural paradigm*[3].

Elaborating on this notion, Bertrand and Valois (1994) argue that a sociocultural paradigm, that inform a corresponding educational paradigm, 'dictates what should be seen and how to see it' as well as 'what needs to be done and how to do it' (p. 30). In such a way that, after the process of socialisation, the adult individual becomes conditioned to perceive society 'according to the dominant and dominated discourse' (p. 30). For centuries, Western civilisation has been shaped by the industrial paradigm**,** which is underpinned by a mechanistic worldview and a positivist-rooted epistemology. This 'scientific-experimental rationality goes hand in hand with a quasi-religious belief in technical progress as a saviour' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 147) and it is still deeply ingrained in our contemporary cultural structures. The singular pathway to knowledge

that it prioritises is anchored in a rationality devoted to success, efficiency, acceleration, productivity, competitiveness, meritocracy and consumption – principles that fundamentally serve the interests of the capitalist market economy**.** Though the contestation of these interests as well as the struggles to foster social justice and emancipation informed by critical theory are strongly at the roots of ALE as a domain of study and practice (Freire, 1970; Lucio-Villegas, 2018), the field remains imprisoned by 'the hegemonic neo-liberal policy repertoire of employability […largely governed by] capitalist oligarchies utilising their socially and culturally manipulative artificial intelligent algorithm' (Hake, 2021, p. 41). Current educational structures are not dissonant with this rationality, since the dominant paradigm is anchored in the overvaluation of technical rationality, the cognitive, and efficient production (Bertrand & Valois, 1994; Lange, 2018), staying 'at the most superficial level of learning' and still forgetting that 'we are … a part of a much larger reality' (Lange, 2024, p. 249).

Going further into the narrative of functionalism and fragmentation, as industrialisation and urbanisation continue to expand, people are increasingly losing direct contact with nature, leading to a diminished sensitivity 'to the "reality" of interconnectedness' (Bainbridge & Negro, 2020, p. 47). Despite growing awareness of environmental issues and the need to preserve ecosystems – stressed in recent years by a global political framework oriented towards sustainable development (United Nations, 2015) – unfortunately the dominant discourse has largely remained within the boundaries of a superficial anthropocentric approach to ecology, rather than embracing a deeper ecological perspective (Naess, 1973). The deeper understanding required for the desired transformation demands 'a profoundly different cosmology, ontology, and epistemology' (Lange, 2018, p. 412), one in which the preservation of the natural environment and ecosystems is grounded in the recognition of their intrinsic value (Earth Charter Initiative, 2012). This perspective implies leaving the ontology of separation and instead to assume the centrality of *relational ontology* which emphasises the concepts of embeddedness and of intra-relation – a view of the human being as a constellation of relationships, fully integrated into a global ecosystem encompassing both living and non-living elements, as well as the human and more-than-human worlds. A relational ontology guided by profound respect for all forms of life and ecosystems (Barad, 2007), named by Lange (2004) as *radical relatedness* – an ontological shift from *having* to *being.* Lange's early study of adult learners in higher education developed under an ecocentric onto-epistemological perspective revealed that 'a restoration of important relationships to self and environment' occurred as participants 'began to relearn organic time, contemplative practices, energy-conserving activities like adequate rest and sleep, and noncommodified simple pleasures' (p. 131). These ideas will be developed further in a next point.

Societal pathways: Degrowth and Eco-swaraj

Various alternatives to the prevailing orientation towards industrialisation and capitalist development – what Lange (2024) terms *composting modernity* – can be found in a range of proposals, philosophies, and systems of thought. Among these, Degrowth and Eco-swaraj are two relevant social movements frameworks that propose systemic transformations. They align with 'the radical critiques of the "post-development" school of thought, which criticised capitalist "development" and the notion that progress necessitates growth, [viewed] as a misguided, destructive, and universalising Western ideology' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 13). These critiques fundamentally challenge the assumption that economic growth is inherently beneficial and that the advancement of productive forces is synonymous with progress and emancipation. Within these

alternative frameworks, work is reconfigured to transcend alienation and align human activity with a good life for all, including 'drastically reduced working hours for all […and a] more pleasurable and useful work' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 97), alongside a more equal sharing of necessary work. Regarding technology, the debate advances criteria for '"convivial technology", "convivial design", "frugal innovations", "digital commons", "peer-to-peer" or "soft digitalisation" […] situated between low-tech solutions and open digitalisation' (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 156). For these authors, such transformations signify the emergence of *nowtopias* within a *degrowth society*, wherein overcoming structural dependencies on growth, intensification, acceleration, and escalation is the appropriate course of action. This vision encompasses three interconnected dimensions of change: ecological justice, social justice, and the redesign of institutions and infrastructures, each underpinned by specific principles. *Ecological justice* necessitates reducing material metabolism, production, and consumption; dismantling structures of domination; and fostering ecologically sustainable ways of life that extend beyond short-term considerations. *Social justice,* in turn, implies securing a good life for all under a transformed metabolism; fostering prosperity beyond a work- and consumption-centred mode of existence; ensuring well-being that is not contingent on economic growth; and promoting power-with dynamics, based on solidarity, collaboration, and deliberation. Finally, the *redesign of institutions and infrastructures* requires severing dependence on growth and continuous expansion, as exemplified by municipal energy suppliers operating outside conventional capitalist imperatives.

Rooted in the ancient Indian philosophy of self-determination and collective governance, *Eco-swaraj* – developed more recently as Radical Ecological Democracy (*Vikalp Sangam*)[4] – is a movement framework that similarly advances a holistic vision of human and nature well-being. Drawing on Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*—an ancient Indian philosophy centred on self-determination and collective decision-making – *Eco-swaraj* links autonomy with ethical responsibility towards others (including the rest of nature, Kothari, 2018). It articulates five spheres of transformation – *ecological wisdom and resilience*, *social well-being and justice, direct or radical political democracy, economic democracy,* and *cultural and knowledge plurality* (including the view that 'learning takes place as part of life rather than in specialised institutions' (Kothari, 2018, p. 52)).

Analysing the Eco-swaraj proposal, we can underscore its strong alignment and coherence with the radical transformation of human consciousness – *eco-consciousness* (UNESCO, 2020) – that we have been exploring. Represented metaphorically as flower petals, these spheres intersect on certain core principles – knowledge as a commons, creativity and innovation, meaningful work and livelihoods, sustainable trade, sustainable transport and energy, as well as responsibility, solidarity, and reciprocity. These, in turn, are underpinned by values such as equality and equity, respect for all forms of life, diversity and pluralism, and a balanced collective and individual existence. Together, these principles and values constitute the ethical and spiritual ideals of Eco-swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy, making the movement a timely and systemic alternative to growth. Within ALE, educators can draw on these principles to encouraging critical ecological consciousness, enabling learners to engage with sustainability as an embodied, relational and political practice.

For the context of ALE, such ecocentric principles are increasingly visible in the work of authors who rearticulate ALE 'within a relational post-humanist account of learning [drawing] on deep ecology' (Vandenabeele et al., 2024, p. 232); who engage in (Radical) Popular Education as a movement and practice of resistance and liberation that entails creating 'new relationships between people and between people and nature' (Lucio-Villegas & Fragoso, 2016, p. 34); who emphasise the relearning of interpersonal

relationships as *conviviality*, alongside other forms of social organisation grounded in interdependence; and who highlight learning to act towards *liberation from excess*, recognising the significance of voluntary simplicity (frugal living), ecopedagogy, and the cultivation of a sufficiency-oriented culture (e.g., Canário, 2021; Misiaszek, 2023; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004). Related educational processes reinterpret *prosperity*, invite resonance (as a counter to acceleration and alienation), value time prosperity (abundance of time and meaningful relationships), and promote place-based learning (e.g., Maksimovic, 2024). Such processes emphasise slowing down and opening to embodied knowing, interweaving action and reflection – exemplified in von Kotze's (2024) *gut pedagogy* and in Holmqvist and Millenberg's (2024) a *seed package* on climate change – so that learners connect personal, everyday experiences with broader social and environmental sustainability, thereby encouraging a dialectical understanding of existence.

Taken together, the movement horizons of movements such as Degrowth and Eco-swaraj can open space for pedagogical pathways in ALE. Building on the societal pathways outlined above, we next turn to ALE's role in moving beyond anthropocentrism toward inclusive relational frameworks.

Challenging anthropocentric perspectives and advancing towards more inclusive frameworks

This shift necessitates contesting anthropocentric perspectives and embracing Barad's (2007) concept of ontoepistemology – *knowing as part of being* – which underscores 'the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology when engaging in knowledge production, with scientific practices, and with the world itself and its inhabitants – human and nonhuman beings that intra-actively co-constitute the world' (Hyde, 2021, p. 381).

Ontology, meaning 'the way a person exists in the world', a way of being, for instance cultivating greater presence in the moment, is shaped by 'deeply established mental and emotional inclinations that affect the overall quality and tone of one's existence' (Hoggan, 2018, p. 45). Epistemology, on the other hand, pertaining to ways of knowing may encompass the emergence of this new consciousness – one that embraces multiple modes of knowledge, with particular emphasis on extra-rational forms, such as contemplative, intuitive, somatic, or embodied ways of knowing. Grounded in this onto-epistemology, one of the primary roles of ALE in contemporary societies is to strongly participate in challenging anthropocentric perspectives and structures, while simultaneously promoting more inclusive relational frameworks (Košmerl & Mikulec, 2022; Lange, 2018). This entails integrating into its policies and educational organised processes the imperative to cultivate a deep ecological awareness, fostering what Khasnabish (2020) terms 'ecologies of collective liberation' (p. 1725), grounded in the radical interdependence between humans, other living beings, and nature. ALE must itself be reimagined to participate in the radical and transformative reconfiguration of human action towards shaping peaceful, just, and sustainable futures for all (Ireland, 2023). This reconfiguration requires a shift in its ultimate goal 'from a humanitarian charter to one of ecological justice' (UNESCO, 2020, p. 7), from an anthropocentric basis to ecocentric horizons. In pursuit of this vision, the literature across different fields highlights multiple pathways – such as *buen vivir*[5], *ubuntu*[6] – that at an underlying level have strong common denominators, each offering interesting inspirations for paradigmatic reconstructions.

All these concepts, advocating for social and environmental justice, resonate with the Degrowth movement (Schmelzer et al., 2022) and exemplify diversity of visions and cosmologies. Despite rooted in different cultures and geographies, they share many

commonalities, particularly in their approaches to human flourishing and connection to nature, fostering a good life for all beyond the modern development paradigm. These alternative ways of life constitute a plurality of frameworks that can inspire systemic or paradigmatic change, as they align with the transformation of prevailing structures of domination and exploitation. As such, they are increasingly being considered gateways of opportunity for transcending the 'ruins of the ontological empire of modernity' (Carvalho, 2024, p. 111). Furthermore, they also align closely with UNESCO's (2021) vision of education for 2050, which calls for a 'radical transformation in human eco-consciousness and our ways of living in balance with the living Earth' (p. 34).

Moving towards this goal requires Adult Learning and Education to place strong emphasis on epistemes that foster deep ecological awareness, which cannot merely result from training in ecology and sustainability seen as themes to be learned separated from other issues. The global political framework for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015) necessitates changed educational approaches, those that prepare individuals for a fundamentally different way of understanding, perceiving, experiencing, and interacting with others and the natural world. This implies reframing discussions on education policies within an onto-epistemic framework for pluriversality, which entails de-Westernisation, decoloniality, and the integration of more holistic ontological perspectives in ALE (Lange, 2024; Silova et al., 2020; von Kotze, 2024).

The educational reconstruction that we are speaking of means embracing Earth as a new paradigm that integrates both social and environmental concerns while ceasing to 'use education as a vehicle for promulgating human exceptionalism' (UNESCO, 2020, p. 4). If education 'is to be the engine behind deep societal transformation, then questioning human beings' place in the world should be central to educational debates, research and practices', and 'the epistemological, cultural [and] ideological paradigms in which education is embedded should also be brought to awareness, discussed' and ultimately reformed (Maison, 2023, p. 2).

A shift in consciousness towards the interconnection between human and non-human realms has the potential to foster transformative learning, reflected in an ethics of care for oneself, the community, and the planet. The principle that improved relationships between human and non-human worlds enhance well-being is exemplified by a concrete case in which the re-establishment of this connection proved to be profoundly restorative. Participants in a study conducted by Bainbridge and Negro (2020) showed a transformed perspective on their existence, significantly reshaping their beliefs, particularly in the context of challenging life situations – an experience common among the vulnerable groups with whom ALE frequently engages. In an earlier study within the context of a university extension course, 'Transforming Working and Living', whose conceptual framework moved beyond the fragmentary thinking that fosters alienation and disconnection, Lange (2004) observed this same restorative process. She identified a departure from anthropocentrism, supported by testimonies reflecting transformative learning: 'As people saw themselves embedded in their bodies, a social world, a species, a natural world, and a larger cosmos, they moved beyond anthropocentric worldviews and humanist moralities to a much larger horizon of significance' (p. 131). Another example of this kind of learning connected to the expansion of awareness emerged from a workshop on embodiment in ALE, where Luraschi (2020) highlighted the following testimony of an adult learner:

> I felt as if I was being called. By whom? By the leaves! … I was actually seeing myself in the leaves. I was aware of the vitality of leaves and of my body, made of a soul, which is itself nature. (Luraschi, 2020, p. 198)

The more inclusive, resonant, and profound forms of relationality we are emphasising point to new narratives and conceptual frameworks, paving the way for alternative worldviews while simultaneously enabling profound shifts in ideas and perspectives. They are regenerative, are rescuing us from fragmentation and connecting all life to the ground of being.

Ecocentric epistemology, ontology, and pathways forward

The onto-epistemic transformations under discussion can be observed at both personal and societal levels. On a personal level, this shift is characterised by a movement from self-centredness to eco-centredness, requiring a process of epistemological and ontological transformations within the individual. It aligns with the paradigm of *deep ecology,* which conceptualises the self as an integral part of a complex, interconnected ecosystem. This process entails experiencing oneself as ecocentric – fully embedded within an interdependent multilayered ecological system. Such a 'transformation is not just an epistemological process involving a change in worldview and habits of thinking; it is also an ontological process where participants experience a change in their being in the world, including their forms of relatedness' (Lange, 2004, p. 137). In a similar way, Gadotti (2005) argues that the transformation in question is not solely concerned with fostering a more harmonious relationship with the environment; rather, it addresses 'the deeper meaning of what we do with our existence' (p. 22), beginning with everyday life. A state of consciousness grounded in an ecocentric epistemology reflects the understanding that humanity's role is not to control or dominate nature but to exist as an integral part of it, recognising that humans are situated 'in the unfolding universe story' (Lange, 2018, p. 414). Thus, the epistemic transformation (from self to eco) that this state of consciousness entails is fundamentally embodied in nature, requiring embodied knowing and the enactment of an embodied relationality that transcends the traditional mind-body and body-world dichotomies (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Varela et al., 1993). This does not imply replacing the self with the eco; rather, it fosters a respectful and expansive perspective, cultivating embodied spaces for development and learning within safe, pressure-free environments – allowing sufficient time for transformative processes to unfold, whether these pertain to conscious or unconscious anxieties or other aspects of human experience. This transformation in consciousness, which necessitates transformative experiences, is more likely to occur when individuals *choose to engage* with and respond to difficult situations *rather than seeking to dominate or control* them. In this regard, Bainbridge and Negro (2020) advocate for 'rejecting the stultifying prospect of increasingly dominant technical rationalist approaches to education' (p. 55), a position that, we argue, extends beyond education to society and life in general. There is a pressing need for a renewed paradigmatic horizon – one that envisions human beings in a more holistic and integrated manner, seeing them as *becoming worldly* and *becoming with* the Earth (UNESCO, 2020). This shift entails inhabiting the vital hollow spaces of becoming, moving beyond restrictive modes of thought and epistemological frameworks.

The growing centrality of contemplative knowledge

> Contemplation doesn't just destroy and rebuilt the world simply by reorganizing the elements given to one's experience. Rather, in giving oneself to that which is wholly other, it allows genuine freedom and novelty to emerge. (Walsh, 2016, p. 36)

The onto-epistemological changes we have been addressing are associated with the reappraisal of modes of knowledge refined and perfected over centuries in various parts of the world by wisdom and contemplative traditions. While positivist science gained an enviable status in the field of knowledge by distancing itself from direct experience in the name of safeguarding the objectivity of observations, contemplative knowledge followed the opposite path, specialising in intimate contact with direct experience. However, since the emergence of science in the Modern Age, these practices of training attention, awareness, embodiment, and radical relationality, although remaining active, have persisted largely in invisibility within confined contexts. It was only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that the dialogue between (neuro)scientists, poets, Buddhists, and meditation teachers (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013) brought their importance back into the foreground, under the designation of contemplative science (Dorjee, 2016; Wallace, 2007). According to Kabat-Zinn (2011), this emergence is due to the historical convergence of two very distinct epistemologies of knowledge construction: contemporary science and the knowledge of contemplative traditions. Mindfulness-based approaches (Crane et al., 2017), which at present have been revolutionising various fields of knowledge, originate from these millenary traditions, both Eastern (e.g., Buddhists, Yogis) and Western (e.g., pre-Socratics, the Stoic tradition of Ancient Greece), committed to modes of life oriented towards the ontological transformation of the person (Reis & Oliveira, 2016) and towards societal transformation[7].

From an educational perspective, contemplative training (e.g., Barbezat & Bush, 2014) has shown potential to challenge the *status quo*. Including mindfulness, it consists 'essentially in the re-integration of body and mind, sensibility and conceptuality, emotion and reason, heart and head, self and other, humanity and nature' (Deroche et al., 2025, p. 848), as well as love and knowledge (Zajonc, 2009). Envisioning mindfulness or contemplation *as* education (Ergas, 2019), and not *in* education[8], as an educational culture, it brings Life/the whole back into education. Illustrating this way, and coming from his experience with mindfulness, Tisdell and Riley (2019) recognises that 'it has become [for him] a path to living a wise and skilful life' (p. 16). As it entails a profound and desirable onto-epistemological change, we argue that contemplative education can (and should) assume a central role in mainstream education in contemporary society, and should be integrated into the various contexts and spaces of ALE. Tisdell and Riley (2019) adopt a similar position in considering contemplative practices 'an important part of adult education' although they situate them 'as a partial prescription for lifelong learning and well-being' (p. 18). Furthermore, contemplative education has an emancipatory potential that is given very little consideration by scholars of ALE. Indeed, the scope of contemplative knowledge is not only to enable us to be more mindful in any context and at any time – although this is already of great importance – but also to enhance our awareness of how we relate to ourselves and others, as well as of the structures and patterns in which we are embedded that can cause harm to ourselves, others, and the natural world (Berila, 2015; Magee, 2019). Contemplative training mobilises and develops 'a capacity we are all born with, like the capacity for language or walking' (Tisdell & Riley, 2019, p. 11), but it needs to be practiced, and it takes time. It is especially relevant in a hyper-technological society that fosters immediacy, unstable attention, multitasking and distraction. Indeed, the contemplative education approach is seen by Deroche et al. (2025) 'as the core antidote to the root cognitive problem of the information age: distractibility' (p. 854).

Contemplative knowledge as a pathway to overcoming disconnection

As we have discussed previously, Western civilisation and its education, predominantly oriented towards instrumental rationality, require a paradigmatic shift that overcomes disconnection. In this regard, we consider particularly relevant the analysis by Bai et al. (2009), which highlights that the educational architecture of the present rests on relationships of objectification, identifying three axes of disconnection. The first axis concerns disconnection from our own body, treated as an object: we are not educated to attune to what is happening in the body, to develop intimate knowledge of it; instead, we focus on what we can do with it to achieve certain outcomes – an objectification and instrumentality rooted in the dualist legacy culturally inscribed within us. A second axis is the perception of the world as categorically separate from ourselves; from this perception arises the conviction that the planet exists to serve us, holding a reservoir of resources and goods for human consumption – a consciousness of objectification entirely devoid of the sense of inter-being, the understanding that we, the mountains, the rivers, the trees, and so forth, participate in an interpenetrating flow that involves and connects all beings. The third axis of disconnection is that between human and human; as relationships are predominantly instrumental, we relate to others primarily to achieve certain outcomes (good performance evaluations, recognition, acceptance, etc.) rather than valuing others for their intrinsic worth and with a full-hearted engagement. Even when relationships are pleasant and agreeable, they remain fundamentally instrumental. In education based on the subject-object duality, attention is constantly directed outward, towards abstract and discursive knowledge (Bai et al., 2009; Ergas, 2015). There exists an entire relationship of objectification that is more about having power and control over the world and each other than truly knowing it (Zajonc, 2009).

In contrast, the development of the contemplative dimension of the human being promotes relational modes of knowing that cultivate a profound sensitivity and awareness of the other; it develops the capacity for becoming aware; focuses knowledge of somatic, affective, and intuitive sensitivities; and generates epistemic units of inter-being (Bai et al., 2009). One could even say that it 'allows us to *be* free, to *be* healing, to *be* human, to *be* filled, to *be* peace, to *be* joy, and to *be* at home with ourselves so that we can *do* justice [emphases in original]' (Chatman et al., 2025, p. 2). From indwelling, which enables a complete, non-existentially alienated experience, emerges security, repose, contentment, and a primordial trust. Consequently, education that fosters contemplative knowledge creates frameworks for other modes of consciousness and is based on a specific set of postulates.

Assumptions of contemplative knowledge

Reviewing literature about contemplative knowledge, we have identified a set of postulates that provide conceptual anchoring for pedagogical action moving from the anthropocentric to the ecocentric, from objectification to the 'new story of relationality' (Lange, 2024, p. 239). These postulates align closely with the central ideas advanced in this article. Accordingly, we present below those deemed fundamental, as identified through the specialised literature on the subject:

- The human being is an integral part of larger systems (social, cultural, and natural) with which he is intrinsically interconnected, even if they are frequently unaware of this; therefore, contemplative knowledge begins with the assumption of the nonexistence of separation, leaving aside dichotomies such as human-

nature, body-mind, subject-object, or even internal-external (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc, 2009).

- The intrinsic interdependence and interpenetration of all phenomena 'inspires an ethic of universal compassion' (Walsh, 2016, p. 32), which safeguards the well-being of the self, others, and nature, inherently carrying the intention of causing no harm (Hanh, 2021) – contemplative knowledge is not restrictive, expanding compassion and affection to all beings. As Barbezat and Bush (2014) emphasise, we act on the basis of a moral judgment rooted in an empathetic connection to a living world, in contrast to action governed by utility calculation and cost–benefit analysis.
- Experience does not possess only *primary qualities* – critical-rational-computational value; it also includes hidden qualities that need to be brought to awareness through contemplative insight (Zajonc, 2009); in this sense, the mind is not conceived as being located in the head or in any specific place – the mind is 'an emergent experiential phenomenon allowing internal and external reality to become manifest' (Tiedman, 2016, p. 12).
- Contemplative training requires an embodied, investigative awareness, a mindful, curious welcoming, and a receptive presence, ready to act, even subtly, for personal, collective, and planetary well-being (Hanh, 2021).
- Contemplative training cultivates receptivity to experiences that transcend the individual self, focusing on the emergent understanding of being – it encourages a deepened awareness of existence as it unfolds in experience. In the Husserlian sense, it activates the *epoché* – the recognition and suspension of prior assumptions about the objects of consciousness – which entails deep reflection; it is a consciousness that immerses in the pure flow of experience without content, and holds the potential to profoundly challenge prevailing conceptions of the mind, culture, and society itself (Tiedman, 2016; Bentz & Giorgino, 2016).
- Contemplative training entails the practice of the phenomenology of consciousness, fostering a radical reconfiguration of what is conceived as *the observer* and eliciting an expanded, penetrating awareness (Dorjee, 2016). It necessarily involves 'participative knowing, a knowing which shares more and more in the pattern of life of the "known" (who is now discovered to be as much the *knower* as the known)' (McIntosh, 1998, p. 132, as cited in Walsh, 2016, p. 40). In this sense, it is regarded as fundamentally emancipatory, capable of engendering a personal revolution – an ontological transformation.
- Contemplative training is a path of discipline and commitment, and, like any other human skill, its development requires regularity, perseverance, and persistence, with patience being one of its key secrets (Moody, 2016).

The pedagogical approach of contemplative knowledge

Since the primary interest of contemplative knowledge[9] is to help learners access subtle, often hidden qualities of experience, it focuses on non-discursive and complex forms of understanding, gained through direct, embodied apprehension (indwelling). Accordingly, this requires pedagogical methods that privilege practice-training attention and embodiment – rather than relying only on discursive methods such as explanation or discussion.

Indwelling the body: We encourage inhabiting the body profoundly, knowing it from within, immersing in it and noting the flow of changing sensations, which allows one to

become aware that it is a living reality of energy in flux, continuously in-forming the person. 'Concentrate yourself into this "Mu", with your 360 bones and 84,000 pores, making your whole body one great inquiry' (Shibayama, 1974, p. 19, as cited in Saari, 2020, p. 29).

Indwelling the senses, emoticons, the space: Engage with the senses, the emotions, and the place through a loving attention; the 'other', the ontological whole in which one participates in the relationship, requires our full attention (whether a person, an animal, a plant, a place, or the city). This attention constitutes a work of consciousness – immersive, situated, and place-based – mobilising cognition as enaction rather than as representation (Varela, 1999).

Indwelling the aesthetic and the intuitive: Emphasis is placed on moving away from discursive reasoning and propositional knowledge; it is not a question of adding knowledge to what we already possess. As the Zen master Lin-Chi (as cited in Saari, 2020) stated, 'what can be known by philosophers and scientists through reasoning is only a fraction of the universe' (p. 31). Instead, it requires a pedagogy of an aesthetic of silence: to notice the beautiful and graceful, to perceive the invisible, and to observe ourselves 'suspended and absorbed between knowing and unknowing' (Caranfa, 2006, p. 93). Language is the world of the visible, the voice of the logic, 'language … robs the world of its invisible essence' (Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Caranfa, 2006, p. 91).

Indwelling relationality: Relationality as a way of being, meaning 'a relationality approach to composting modernity and emplacing ourselves within the living world' (Lange, 2024, p. 252), requires embodied relations and emplaced relational practices, such as emplacing us back in the 'life we have lost in living' (T.S. Eliot, as cited in Deroche et al., 2025, p. 847), and entering respectful, open, receptive, and non-judgmental relations (von Kotze, 2024). That is, to enter into relationship, to listen, and to speak from internally coherent and emotionally regulated states, guided by a sense of the whole and of belonging. This could for example include mindfulness listening – attending with attention and openness to all that emerge – mindfulness walking, freewriting in a journal, reflective reading, deliberative walks, and many other contemplative practices (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Berila, 2015; Ehrström, 2020; Kroll, 2010; von Kotze, 2024; Zajonc, 2009;).

Conclusion

This article has presented a critique of the pervasive power structures dominating societies in the Anthropocene era, contributing in several ways to the deconstruction of the ideological roots of modern and post-modern notions of independence and separation. We have focused on reflecting upon and analysing viable and deeper understandings of sustainable pathways, emerging as alternative worldviews – hopeful visions of new horizons positioning ALE within an ecocentric framework, simultaneously helping to build fair and balanced democracies and sustainable futures for all. Such transformation entails *composting modernity* (Lange, 2024), dismantling the dominant educational paradigm grounded in monolithic, instrumental rationality and anthropocentric ideology, adopting a relational ontology, and affirming dignity and respect for all life forms and the planet. ALE can advance this sociocultural and educational revolution by fostering inclusive relationality and cultivating epistemes that promote deep ecological awareness under an ethic of care for individuals, communities, and the Earth. This revolution aligns with key concepts emphasised in this article, including relational ontology (e.g., embodied learning spaces), sufficiency-oriented culture (embracing voluntary simplicity), pluriversal frameworks (supporting pluriversal curricula), and contemplative

pedagogy (creating safe spaces for embodied, sensory, emotional, place, nondiscursive, and intuitive exploration). Ultimately, it calls for transcending entrenched anthropocentric structures and constructing an ecocentric, just future through diverse epistemic pathways informed by ancient wisdom and revitalised by contemporary interdisciplinary research.

Grounded mainly in the principles of interdependence, deep ecology, and contemplative knowledge, we have argued that these pathways necessitate a fundamentally different cosmology, ontology, and epistemology, along with corresponding pedagogical approaches – which ALE must engage with and cultivate in its contexts and in relation to its agendas. In an increasingly complex and uncertain present, the pathways discussed enable us to outline key principles and directions for the paradigmatic revolutions needed in society and in ALE. They inspire us to look to the future with both confidence and hope. They encourage us to work towards a 'world of creative existence where the vita contemplativa and the vita activa are magnificently interwoven' (Caranfa, 2006, p. 93) for the common good.

Notes

1 The first influential report to highlight the issue of the planet's ecological imbalance and advocate for the necessity of sustainable development was that of the Club of Rome, published in the early 1970s (Meadows et al., 1972).

2 An *educational approach* refers to a broad strategy encompassing policies, knowledge systems, curricula, and methods across formal and non-formal contexts. On the other hand, a *pedagogical approach* is regarded as more specific, focusing on the processes of teaching and learning, or co-learning and teaching, and their relational dynamics.

3 It fundamentally comprises five components: a conception of knowledge; a relationship between the person, society, and nature; values and interests; a method of execution; and the overall meaning of human activity.

4 A process that 'brings together movements, networks, organisations and individuals who have worked at practical and/or conceptual levels on alternatives to mainstream "development" and "political governance" models on a common platform' (Global Tapestry of Alternatives, n.d.)

5 Meaning Good Living (*sumac kawsay or suma qamaña*) is a concept that originated in Ecuador and Bolivia, South America. It was proposed by Eduardo Gudynas, Maristella Svampa, Alberto Acosta, and Pablo Sólon (Ireland, 2014; Schmelzer et al., 2022) and is anchored in the worldviews, perspectives, and experiences of Indigenous people. It emphasises the inseparability of people and nature and its philosophy seeks to integrate humans into their communities by fostering harmonious relationships with nature at both personal and collective levels, promoting sustainability, and ensuring a dignified life for all. This approach is considered an alternative and serves also as a critique of capitalist models of development (Ireland, 2014, 2023).

6 *Ubuntu* comes from the communal traditions and ethical values of the Bantu cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa. It was popularised by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and emphasises the centrality of relationships, expressed in notions such as *I relate, therefore I am*. It underscores human interdependence and complementarity, encapsulated in the philosophy *I am because you are* and *we are branches of the same tree*. Furthermore, it prioritises an ethics of care, encompassing self-care, care for others, and care for the planet (Gonçalves & Alarcão, 2020).

7 The first programme with rigorous empirical validation, primarily known for its positive effects in helping people cope with stress and chronic pain – Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) – was systematised by Kabat-Zinn (2011), based on principles from Buddhist and Yogic wisdom traditions, with a broad purpose: to serve both as a vehicle for individual transformation (helping people take better care of themselves) and for societal transformation (building societies and lifestyles grounded in well-being, quality of life, and respect for ecosystems). However, due to its widespread popularity and the distortions with which it has been appropriated and implemented, MBSR is not always considered in this way (Crane et al., 2017), and has even been strongly criticised as a form of 'McDonaldization' (Hyland, 2017, p. 336) of well-being, often serving instrumental interests and the commodification of knowledge.

[8] Viewed not in its popular appropriations – as merely functional tools aligned with the dominant educational model – mindfulness and contemplative practices are often introduced as programmes for stress reduction, as interventions, rather than as a way of being or a mode of relating to experience.

[9] While *contemplative knowledge* is the resulting understanding or insight that arises from situated, experiential and embodied knowledge – centred on awareness of one's own nature and the interconnectedness of all things – *contemplative knowing* denotes the intentional, holistic process of being fully present and receptive to the moment, where mind, heart, and senses are open to the 'now' as it is, without judgment and without deliberate analysis or critique of what emerges.

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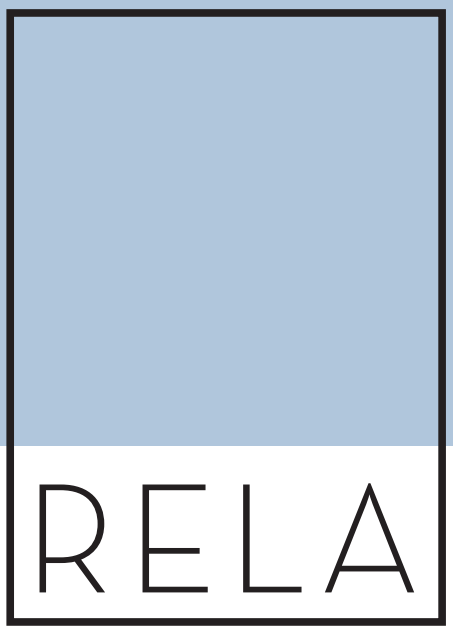
Aims & Scope

The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

RELA is published on behalf of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA).



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