RELA European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults

Thematic issue of RELA:
Participation, Transformation, and Revolution: ALE and social change

Submission deadline: 7th April 2025

Lead editors for this issue: Diana Holmqvist, Fergal Finnegan, Maja Maksimovic

We find ourselves amidst an era of acute crises. 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 parts of Europe are moving towards authoritarianism, and elections, a basic element of citizenship, are being compromised.

All this serves to remind us of the importance of active citizenship to democracy. Meaningful active citizenship depends on the sustained political engagement of individuals, groups, communities, and movements. Dissent and demands for accountability, as well as movements for recognition, redistribution, and full participation are the wellsprings of 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).

We know that intense forms of active citizenship are often hard to sustain and require a great deal of tenacity and hope in transformative social change. 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 failure of state socialism and national liberation struggles to achieve their goals. The decline of radical imagination can also be connected to the neoliberalisation of society and education globally (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 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. In hybrid regimes, where the semblance of democratic structures coexists with authoritarian practices, public articulation of disagreement and call for accountability are systematically controlled, and the possibilities for meaningful change are severely limited (Popović & Maksimović, 2024). Even in moments of resistance, authorities 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.

Under these circumstances, we think it is important to open up scholarly debate and discussion on the varied ways we understand the relationship between *social change* and *adult education and learning.* We are especially interested in how ALE relates to very significant forms of social change, and varied ways of imagining this, especially in terms of *participation*, *transformation*, and *revolution.*

Probably the most common idea in contemporary ALE is that participation in adult education enhances social and political *participation*. A significant body of policy and research advocates and explores how participation can be widened especially for groups and communities which have been historically excluded from participation in education and society (for an overview see Rubenson, 2018). But of course participation can mean many different things. It can refer to knowing one's roles, rights, and responsibilities as a citizen and taking part in elections, as well as richer and deeper forms of social and community engagement sometimes defined in terms of national states and sometimes in more inclusive solidaristic ways. Some even use the term as a type of political vision which involves developing participatory democracy in communities, workplaces, and our educational institutions. On the other hand, in contexts where adult education for citizenship is not systematically supported, merely participating in the public sphere, engaging in dialogue, and expressing dissent in public spaces represents a specific way of learning about active citizenship, especially when its original mechanisms have been undermined. This form of participation serves as a grassroots practice of civic engagement, fostering a deeper understanding of democratic values and practices even in the absence of formal support systems.

The idea of *transformation* is also frequently used to describe the ideals and impact of ALE, albeit in diverse ways (Cranton & Taylor. 2012; Cunningham, 1998; Mezirow, 1991 etc.). Just as with participation, transformation can mean different things (Hoggan, 2022), and as a term used very widely in policies, institutional culture and ALE scholarship so it is worth exploring what exactly is entailed in the specific ways we understand transformation. Take for instance, transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), one of the most influential theories of transformation in the adult education field, which is built around the idea that critical reflection on assumptions allows us to live and act more effectively in a changing world. This includes, amongst other things, contributing to progressive, democratic social change. Under what circumstances and conditions does critical reflection support democratic life and lead to social change, and when does it not? We think these types of questions are worth pursuing in relation to this and other approaches which analyse ALE using the discourses of transformation.

While the language of participation and transformation is commonplace – even pervasive – the idea of *revolution* is rarely discussed in contemporary adult education research. This is striking, considering the fact that a 'revolutionary horizon' has been an important element in the history of adult education (Steele, 2010) and has, at least in part, also influenced our notions of participation and transformation. It is impossible to understand the past 200 years without taking account of revolutions as an ideal, as a constellation of images, and as political and cultural events (Traverso, 2021). Revolutions can be construed as especially intense

points in social change processes. Sparked by dissatisfaction with the status quo, revolutions can mobilise bodies and minds and give rise to novel ideas and visions of the future radically at odds with the present. They have a disruptive character and can challenge the established hegemonic order, opening up the space to imagine new and more just societies and seeking the establishment of new political, legal, and economic frameworks free from external interference and domination. Revolutions have had both progressive and tragic consequences, paving the way to authoritarianism, but there can be no doubt that they have profoundly shaped our conceptualisations of active citizenship and democracy. Think of the revolutions in France and Haiti in the 1790s, Russia in 1917, Portugal in 1974, and of events in Eastern Europe in 1989-1991. Or the wave of anticolonial revolutions that sought to dismantle structures of exploitation and subjugation throughout the mid twentieth century Think also of the impact of failed revolutions in Spain in 1936 or Chile in 1973 or globally in 1968. Consider also how the reality and perceptions of the 'colour' revolutions of Eastern Europe have come to shape what is taking place in Europe today, especially in the Ukraine. There can be no doubt however we view any of these specific revolutions the successes and failures of these events and processes have shaped our political imagination in remarkable ways.

While revolutionary situations continue to occur frequently (Barker, Dale & Davidson, 2021), the concept of *revolution* itself seems to have passed out of public discourse in favour of terms such as *participation* and *transformation*. This social fact - and this is a novelty in terms of modern history - is worthy of consideration in terms of what it discloses about contemporary society. Although there are protests and uprisings, it seems that they may not necessarily result in the fundamental and long-term political change typically associated with revolutions. For instance, while the 5th of October Revolution in Serbia resulted in the immediate ousting of the Milošević regime, expected political changes did not endure in the long run. Despite initial optimism and hope for democratic reforms, Serbia did not transition to a functioning democracy. This topic also raises questions about how cultural and educational processes link, or not, to political revolutions, how adult education can contribute to democratic revolutions against authoritarian regimes, and how ALE can or has facilitated deep-rooted post-revolutionary transformations. For instance, in Portugal, the spontaneous social movements that emerged during the revolutionary process in 1974 led to an attempt to create an adult education system based on the many civil society groups active in this field. In the long run, however, several factors combine to push both popular education and adult education to the margins of society in Portugal. We wish to open up space to discuss these sorts of events and if resisting authoritarianism today requires new coordinates or might need to salvage ideas from older revolutionary traditions.

As these examples indicate, revolutions are not just political phenomena. They come in many forms – from technological, or conceptual, to moral, and national. Nor do they always take the form of a dramatic 'event'. As Raymond Williams (1961) points out, cultural revolutions can occur through discontinuous, lengthy, incremental processes.

Relevant questions for this special issue to explore include:

How do we understand and describe the relationship between social change and ALE? How do we understand *participation*, *transformation* and/or *revolution* in describing actual and hoped-for change? How and why do new paradigms gain traction? How are conceptions of

education – of what is worth knowing and how it can be learned – transformed? Reflecting on recent discussions within the ESREA network for Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning, we are prompted to inquire: In what ways do major strands of adult education theory, such as critical pedagogy and transformative learning, 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)? What role, if any, does prefiguration and the conceptualisation of revolution-as-process and as a dimension of everyday life (Davis, 2012) play in this? How can engagement with dialogical exchanges facilitate a collective envisioning of alternative realities and mobilize individuals toward transformative action?

We know that radical movements have made a significant contribution to the field of adult education. This includes the development of popular education (Hall, Clover & Scandrett, 2011; Jara, 2010; Manicom & Walters, 2012; Mayo, 2020), critical pedagogy (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1972; hooks, 2014; Morrow & Torres, 2019 inter alia), and participatory research (Hall,1981; Rappaport, 2020). When we explore this part of the field how are participation, transformation and revolution understood in relation to each other? Which of these terms has the greatest saliency today, why and what might this indicate about changes in radical adult education? We also note that interest movement learning has increased greatly in recent years (Atta & Holst, 2023), we find it relevant to ask again what was, is, and should be the role of social movements in adult education: How do contemporary social movements construe change in relation to participation, transformation and revolution and how does this shape the learning processes with such movements? Is critical pedagogy today stretched in so many directions that the political and ethical commitments that once defined its purpose, including a commitment to revolutionary change (McLaren, 2000), are now invisible? Can the same be said of the more explicitly radical and movement orientated ideas of popular education? In what contexts and in what ways is popular education still revolutionary? Has the institutionalization of popular education suppressed class issues, subdued the working class, and side-lined questions of exploitation, or on the contrary has it helped sustain and develop popular education? Should we read the variations in different forms of popular education (for instance in Latin America and Scandinavia) as divergent ways of thinking about social transformation and democracy? How does political disappointment, even grief, shape our ideas of educational purpose, pedagogical practice and conceptions of popular education and transformative learning, having in mind that this is enough for meaningful collective engagement? More generally, what types of metaphors, models, or maps are fruitful to furthering our understanding of revolutions and paradigmatic transformations from an adult education perspective?

We also wish to invite reflections on participation, transformation and revolution vis a vis learning for 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, 1992, Bellamy Foster, 2022; Bresnihan & Hesse, 2021). As exemplified by the current degrowth movements (Schmelzer, Vetter & Vansintjan, 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?

In exploring all these questions, we would very much welcome a range of contributions that engage with empirical examples from across and beyond Europe, as well as explorations of history, methodology, or theory.

Paper should be submitted by 7th April 2025 via the RELA journal online system. If you have any queries about the Special Issue please contact: Maja Maksimović (maksimovic.ma@gmail.com). The editors for the Special Issue are Diana Holmqvist, Fergal Finnegan and Maja Maksimovic.

References

Atta, M., & Holst, J. D. (2023). Deriving a theory of learning from social movement practices. A systematic literature review. *European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, *14*(1), 177-196.

Barker, C., Dale, G., & Davidson, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age*. Haymarket Books.

Bellamy Foster, J. (2022). The Return of the Dialectics of Nature: The Struggle for Freedom as Necessity. *Historical Materialism*, *30*(2), 3-28.

Bookchin, M. (1992). A philosophical naturalism. *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, *2*.

Bowl, M. (2017). *Adult education in neoliberal times*. Springer International Publishing.

Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global networks*, *10*(2), 182-222.

Bresnihan, P., & Hesse, A. (2021). Political ecologies of infrastructural and intestinal decay. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, *4*(3), 778-798.

Castoriadis, C. (1975). *L'institution imaginaire de la société*. Seuil.

Cranton, P., & Taylor, E. W. (2012). Transformative learning theory: Seeking a more unified theory. In E. W. Taylor, P. Cranton, & Associates Eds.), The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice (pp. 3–20). Jossey-Bass.

Cunningham, P. M. (1998). The social dimension of transformative learning. PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, 7, 15–28.

Darder, A. (2015). *Culture and power in the classroom: Educational foundations for the schooling of bicultural students*. Routledge.

Desjardins, R., & Rubenson, K. (2013). Participation Patterns in Adult Education: the role of institutions and public policy frameworks in resolving coordination problems. European Journal of Education, 48(2), 262–280. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26357803

Davis, L. (2012). Anarchism and the future of revolution. In R. Kinna (Ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Anarchism* (pp. 212-232). Continuum International Publishing Group.

Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1991). *Social movements: A cognitive approach*. Penn State Press.

Freire, P. (1972). Education: domestication or liberation?. *Prospects*, *2*(2), 173-181.

Giroux, H. A. (2004). Critical pedagogy and the postmodern/modern divide: Towards a pedagogy of democratization. *Teacher education quarterly*, *31*(1), 31-47.

Gustavsson, B. (2013). The idea of democratic *bildung*: Its transformation in space and time. In Laginder, A., Nordwall, H. & Crowther, J. (eds.) *Popular Education, Power and Democracy.* National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Hall, B. L., Clover, D. E., Crowther, J. I. M., & Scandrett, E. (2011). Social movement learning: A contemporary re-examination. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *43*(2), 113-116.

Hall, B. L. (1981). Participatory research, popular knowledge and power: A personal reflection. *Convergence*, *14*(3), 6.

Harvey, D. (2005). *Spaces of neoliberalization: towards a theory of uneven geographical development* (Vol. 8). Franz Steiner Verlag.

Hoggan, C. (2022). Mapping the terrain: Analytic tools for future thinking about transformation. In *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation* (pp. 91-108). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

hooks, b. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.

Jara, O. H. (2010). Popular education and social change in Latin America. *Community Development Journal*, *45*(3), 287-296.

Khasnabish, A. (2020). Ecologies of the radical imagination. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(12), 1718-1727.

Lange, E. A. (2023). *Transformative sustainability education: Reimagining our future*. Routledge.

Larsson, S. (2001). Seven aspects of democracy as related to study circles. I*nternational Journal of Lifelong Education, 20*(3), 199-217, http://doi.org/10.1080/02601370110036073

Lövgren, J. (2022). From nation building to global citizenship: human rights education in the Nordic folk high schools. *Human Rights Education Review, 5*(2), 77–97. https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.4470

Maison, L. M. (2023). 'Who owns time?': Reflecting on the temporal dimension of sustainability with Zapatista and Norwegian educators. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1-19.

Manicom, L., & Walters, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Feminist popular education in transnational debates: Building pedagogies of possibility*. Springer.

Mayo, P. (2020). Praxis in Paulo Freire's emancipatory politics. *International Critical Thought, 10*(3), 454-472.

Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning. Jossey-Bass

McLaren, P. (2000). *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the pedagogy of revolution*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Morrow, R. A., & Torres, C. A. (2019). Rereading Freire and Habermas: Philosophical anthropology and reframing critical pedagogy and educational research in the neoliberal anthropocene. *The Wiley handbook of Paulo Freire*, 239-274.

Popović, K., & Maksimović, M. (2024). Hybrid political regimes and adult education-the example of Serbia. In M. Milana, P. Rasmussen, & M. Bussi, M. (Eds.), *Research handbook on adult education policy* (pp. 273-288). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Raekstad, P., & Gradin, S. S. (2020). *Prefigurative politics: Building tomorrow today*. Polity Press.

Rappaport, J. (2020). *Cowards don't make history: Orlando Fals Borda and the origins of participatory action research*. Duke University Press.

Rubenson, K. (2018). Conceptualizing Participation in Adult Learning and Education: Equity Issues. In: Milana, M., Webb, S., Holford, J., Waller, R., Jarvis, P. (eds) *The Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Schmelzer, M., Vetter, A., & Vansintjan, A. (2022). *The future is degrowth: A guide to a world beyond capitalism*. Verso Books.

Steele, T. (2010). Enlightened publics: popular education movements in Europe, their legacy and promise. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 42*(2), 107-123.

Traverso, E. (2021). *Revolution: An intellectual history*. Verso Books.

Williams, R. (1961). *The long revolution*. Columbia University Press.