

**Thematic issue of RELA:  
Radical popular education today: Prospects and possibilities**

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**Lead editors for this issue:** Fergal Finnegan, António Fragoso, Barbara Merrill

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Freire's centenary is being widely celebrated in 2021 and had led to extensive reflection, debate and discussion and we want to invite authors to submit papers for a RELA Special Issue focussed on radical popular education. We want this Special Issue to provide the opportunity to reflect on the current state and future prospects of radical popular education in relation to theory, praxis and methodology.

Freire's work has been enormously influential within adult education and is also the most widely cited and used adult educator outside of the field. Underpinning Freire's ideas is the proposition that all education is political, most famously in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Freire states that education is either for 'liberation' or 'domestication' (Freire, 1972). Education for liberation entails, for Freire, the need for educators to overtly take the side of the oppressed and marginalised and that this political stance involves 'educational dialogue and social action, or *praxis*, with the oppressed in order to understand and act upon the causes of their oppression' (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p 11).

his radical version of popular education is especially well developed in Latin America but is also associated with a range of educational initiatives across the globe. It 'embodies a commitment to social justice, the promotion of a critical democracy and a vision of a better, fairer world in which education has a key role to play' (Coare & Johnston, 2003: ix). Freire advocates that popular educators seek to create knowledge dialogically and that learning should begin with the lived experiences of learners and that the educational process is a learning experience for both the educator and the learner. The aim of radical popular education is to create 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1997) which aims to link experience and theory in a critical way and facilitate learners with a deeper understanding of their lives and how they are positioned in society and become transformative agents. In Freire's words:

The oppressed are not marginals living outside society. They have always been inside - inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves (Freire, 1972).

It has been argued that this sort of social and educational transformation requires the following (Martin, Crowther, Galloway, Johnston & Merrill, 1999, p. 9):

- 'its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle
- Its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- It attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action'.

As such Freire's work is best seen as a particularly rich example of a set of ideas and practices drawn from a much wider collective tradition. Popular education has been created and recreated through waves of social movement activity in various contexts, most notably anti-colonial, workers, feminist, anti-racist and alterglobalisation movements. This has occurred on a range of scales. For example, in Portugal after the 25<sup>th</sup> April revolution there was an attempt to build an entire system of adult education emerging from popular education

associations (Melo & Benavente, 1978). There are several examples of large scale effort in Brazil, such as the democratisation of schools and adult education at a state level (Apple, 2013; Freire, 1993) and also in movements such as the “Sem Terra” (landless) movement, and those fighting for the homeless or indigenous rights (Souza, 2007). During high points of social movement activity popular education can be usefully described as social learning process which seeks to develop really useful knowledge at a local level but which also aims transform public institutions and change power structures in a profound way (Wainwright, 2014). In less active periods or contexts this activity operates at a smaller scale with much more ‘local’ and modest goals but retains a strong sense of the importance of non-formal educational processes that combine with forms of action and struggle for social transformation (Canário, 2007). For example, the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh, the Highlander Centre in the Tennessee or CREA in Barcelona.

Since the 1980s we have witnessed a ‘reduction of democracy as a political process to the market as an economic process’. (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 9) (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 9) The workers and anticolonial movements and mass left parties which that have been important to popular education in the past century have waned in power. Adult education as a field has also changed and in many contexts ‘politics is thus diminished to the making of market choices facilitated by lifelong learning’ (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 9) with a focus on learning rather than education. The landscape of adult education work has been further reconfigured in recent years through economic crisis, widening inequalities and more recently by the pandemic crisis. But as Lima (2018) argues it is:

Particularly at times of crisis, it becomes evident that what is needed most is democratic adult education, capable of resisting adaptation, despite the fact that an education of this nature is difficult to achieve, since it is considered subversive (2018, p. 230).

With this rich history of experiment and major social and political transformations in mind we invite authors to submit articles that critically reflect on the state of radical popular education in the present conjuncture and its significance to the broader field of adult education.

We are especially interested in articles that explore the following topics and questions:

- How has popular education been affected or changed in the last decades by political and policy shifts? Have we witnessed the emergence of new models, strategies and pedagogies in popular education?
- What is the role of popular education in contemporary egalitarian and transformative social movements such as Women in Black in Poland and Black Lives Matter, or movements for climate justice? How has the repertoires and organisation of social movements changed and has this affected the way education, state power and emancipation are viewed?
- What do we know about the changing ‘geographies’ of radical popular education: for instance, what have we learnt from longstanding initiatives in popular education in South and Central America or from where radical popular education has declined?
- We recognise that the theory and practice of popular education is shaped by different cultural contexts not only within Europe but also beyond. For example, the meaning of popular education is different in Scandinavia to the UK or Spain. In this special issue we therefore also want to invite contributions which can make connections and distinctions between radical popular education as we have described here and other types of popular education (for example the Folkhighschools in Scandanavia, Politische Bildung, social pedagogy in Italy and Spain, civic education and so forth).
- We want to understand how popular education can be usefully conceptualised today and what the main trends are in the field. Are there new theoretical and practical approaches that deserve greater attention from the adult education community? Are

“old” theories and practices still being used or becoming visible again, both in research and in public discourses and, if so, why?

- We also need to consider the role and engagement of the academy and academics in relation to popular education. In recent years higher education has been increasingly marketised, encompassing the values and practice of managerialism which has led to an ‘institutional disengagement from social and political action’ (Crowther, Galloway & Martin, 2005, p. 1). What spaces are there for resistance by university researchers and teachers to counteract these tendencies and work with communities through popular education?
- What is the role of participatory and more traditional forms of academic research in popular education? How can researchers generatively combine scientific standards and radical political commitments and what are the contradictions, obstacles and paradoxes that need consideration.

For this thematic issue we welcome conceptual, theoretical, policy, historical or review articles and articles based on empirical studies conducted by adult educators, activists and the academics.

Papers should be formatted according to author guidelines available at [www.rela.ep.liu.se](http://www.rela.ep.liu.se), and submitted through the online system no later than February 1, 2022.

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