Citizenship and the Crisis of Democracy: What Role Can Adult Education Play in Matters of Public Concern?

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> The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> Nay, come, let's go together.
> (Hamlet (Shakespeare), Act 1, Scene 5)

Democracy is said to be in a bad shape. The causes of the crisis seem obvious. There is a growing distrust in our societies vis-à-vis the elites. Donald Trump triumphed in the US-elections on an anti-establishment discourse. Many common people supported a candidate for the presidency who attacked the institutions of the state with 'alternative facts'. His supporters didn't mind his aggressive speeches against women and ethnic minorities. The European project is under threat. The British will leave the European Union. Many Brexit-voters want to keep their borders closed for foreigners. Eastern European countries, mainly Poland and Hungary, have installed autocratic regimes. The Southern European countries feel overpowered by the austerity claims of the Northern-European countries. Countries such as, just to mention a few, Austria, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, known as traditional democratic states, are haunted by xenophobia. In France, an extreme-right party, with a racist history, is leading in the opinion polls. The Union threatens to fall apart. Turkey, at the border of Europe, is moving towards dictatorship. Vast majorities of the population support their autocratic leader. The US and Europe have moved into troubled waters and democratic institutions, political parties, movements and citizens are close to despair. Comparisons with the interbellum are in the air.

Various, often contradictory, reasons are given to explain the belief of many citizens that democracy is in crisis: the fear for newcomers, the threat of terrorism and the discourse on safety, the instability of the economy, neoliberal globalization, the failure of traditional political institutions, the incredibility of political personnel, the hollowing-out of social democracy, the misinformation of citizens, the failing of educational institutions to enlighten participants with democratic competencies. Many of these reasons are probably true or partially true. They interact and often reinforce each other. However, of all these reasons, mainly the latter one raises our interest.

Do educational institutions, particularly the adult education providers, fail to arouse democratic competencies among their participants? Have adult education institutions evolved too much in utilitarian directions, operating in the quasi-markets of educational goods and services? Have adult education institutions lost their critical voice, while trying to adapt to the continuously changing demands of their funding authorities? Or have they developed new answers to the changing social, political and economic climate of recent times? Are they supporting new forms of citizenship in a world in transformation? Or, are old values and practices of critical adult

education still resistant?

Many authors find it hard to present a precise definition of citizenship and citizenship education (Vandenabeele et al, 2011; Nicoll et al, 2013; Tarozzi et al, 2013, Peterson et al, 2016). They all observe that various definitions circulate in political science and educational literature. An important distinction regarding citizenship is made between 'citizenship as status' and 'citizenship as practice'. The first concept refers to the question who belongs to a particular nation state community (Yuval-Davis, 2011) and hence, is entitled to particular rights and duties of that state, whilst the latter concept refers to different kinds of civic participation in democratic practices (Johnston, 2005, Biesta[1], 2011). Other authors, with a political science background, often make a distinction between the liberal, the republican and the communitarian tradition of citizenship (Pierik, 2012), or between the liberal model, the republican model and the moral model (Tarozzi et al, 2013). All these distinctions sometimes (slightly) differ from each other and sometimes overlap. Since this is quite confusing, some authors suggest to be pragmatic and accept this diversity of definitions, since they are all located in 'particular conceptual frameworks and contextual factors' (Peterson et al, 2016, p. XI).

Also regarding citizenship education different definitions circulate in academic literature. However, as Peterson et al (ibid.) observe, they all refer to practices of formal, non-formal and informal learning in connection with issues of (in)justice and (in)equality. In line with this, they present in their 'Handbook of Citizenship Education', a broad range of educational practices focusing on a variety of themes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, intersectionality, disability, refugees and asylum seekers, and issues such as globalization and global justice, peace, intercultural and interreligious dialogue. They furthermore distinguish between citizenship practices that are either socializing or transformative. The socializing practices concern the learning of people to take up roles in different communities, whilst the transformative practices refer to the ways people actively and democratically respond to matters of injustice. We tend to follow this broad approach to citizenship education, linked with various themes and issues, that is either socializing (citizenship-as-status) or transformative (citizenship-as-practice).

Adult education practices have traditionally enabled citizenship participation in direct and indirect ways. The direct ways are related to the connections between adult education organizations and different types of social movements, such as the workers movement, the feminist movement, the ecological movement and even some nationalist movements. These practices have a direct political or public connotation. They are places where the ideologies and strategies of these movements are studied and discussed, where militants get their schooling and where structural changes are strived for. They mainly connect to macro democratic issues. The indirect ways have to do with creating opportunities for participants to meet other people, while engaging with private worries such as the education of their children, questions of religion, culture and economics, or more practical matters of how to get

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[1] Biesta speaks of 'citizenship as outcome', rather than of 'citizenship as status', whereby outcome refers to the result of an educational trajectory.

daily life organized, how to acquire particular skills, etc. These indirect ways not only try to meet individual needs. They may also have social impact in the sense that participants learn to communicate and engage with other people, other habits and other ideas, and hence, learn to reflect critically about their own self-evident assumptions. These indirect ways could be considered 'micro democratic practices' where people improve their capabilities as democratic citizens, but simultaneously turn their private worries into matters of public concern.

Since democracy seems to be in crisis in our present-day societies, we think it is an important challenge to reflect on the role and responsibilities of adult education and learning vis-à-vis that crisis. But also to think about the role of research. Policy makers struggle with issues of individualization and disintegration dynamics in society. They also experience a loss of legitimacy of traditional political structures. In response to this, adult education is often invited to contribute to social cohesion and engage in participatory practices, thereby stimulating more 'active citizenship'. Adult education practices often align with these normative discourses developed in policy circles, thereby adopting a deficit perspective in which '[p]olicy language of citizenship education positions people quite "naturally" as needing the knowledge, values and competencies for citizenship and further development of these' (Nicoll et al, 2013, p. 840). Or, in Biesta's words 'It places (..) people in the position of not yet being a citizen' (2001, p. 13). Such deficit-perspective raises questions to be addressed with regard to policies, practices and research of citizenship education with and for adults.

Is it relevant for adult education organizations to align with that political agenda? Or should they try to develop their own perspective in a more autonomous way? What could, in that case, be their contribution to more 'democratic citizenship'? Is it their responsibility to transform private troubles into matters of public concern? And, if so, to what extent are they able to do so? Do they have to redirect their perspectives, practices and attitudes vis-à-vis 'big' and 'small' democratic issues? Does this also imply a different view on 'learning'? And what about the researchers? To what extent have they reinforced dominant interpretations of the 'democratic deficit'? Should they try to develop alternative interpretations?

The editors of this thematic issue of RELA invite contributors to reflect on questions about the challenges of the crisis of democracy for adult education and learning. We welcome accounts of theoretical and/or empirical research. Contributors should submit their papers through the RELA online system (http://journal.ep.liu.se/index.php/RELA) indicating that the paper is submitted for this thematic issue. **Submission deadline is October 1, 2017.**

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