Adult education: democracy, citizenship and emancipation

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I think of Adult Education as part of a broader system of Permanent Education, in the tradition of the concept of “Éducation Permanente” and as one of the most relevant contributions to the humanization process of human beings. Therefore, AE is not just an instrument at the service of politics, economic competitiveness, employability, up-skilling. It is not even the optimal solution capable of assuring the success against fascism, racism, social discrimination and exclusion, passivity and alienation. But there is no better democratic and peaceful way of dealing with undemocratic threats than through the educational process of raising the Public´s awareness. Advocacy of democratic values but not indoctrination, critical thinking not the *doxa* or the dominant opinion, education *for* and *through* the practice of democratic decision-making processes not just involvement or participationism without any positive consequences, demands dialogue, discussion and arguments among active citizens. It demands education as a practice of freedom, according to one of the main books by Paulo Freire. Freire, as Ivan Illich, Ettore Gelpi and many others have explained why the ideal of “Éducation Permanente” was so important; because it was based on the concept of humans as unfinished and incomplete beings but acknowledging the condition of their incompleteness. That is why according to Freire (1996) education is based on epistemological curiosity and also on our ontological vocation to be more, a vocation for individual and social betterment.

Adult education for democracy is crucial for the democratization of democracy, that is, for the never ending process of democratic improvement, for the quality of democratic practices of citizenship, for bringing more participants to the re-creation of the social world. This is simultaneously part of the adult education agenda for emancipation, autonomy and self-government, and also the heart of a democratic pedagogic process. As we will see it is impossible to achieve deliberative and participative forms of democracy without the contribution of education and apart from educational practices in line with the values of freedom and equality, human rights and social justice. As Fred Twine (1994: 85) wrote, “[…] as the non-material world is socially created, and therefore is continually re-created, many more people should be brought into participating in the process of re-creation. Through

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participation in re-creating their social worlds, people not only express themselves in action and in debate, they also develop their self".

On the contrary, in seeking to adapt perfectly to the social structure, the economy and competitiveness, adult education becomes an inconsistent project, breaking off from its humanistic and critical roots. Its veritable educational dimensions are heavily diluted at the service of economic adjustment. It is thus transformed into "qualification", "skills acquirement" and "human resources management" programmes in which it is often considerably difficult to find a substantive educational project. In such cases, one can speak of the triumph of an educational policy centred on "vocationalist" "logics of action", which is not only rarely able to value some of the most relevant critical traditions of adult education, popular education, political and civic education and education for democratic citizenship, but also to articulate with the objectives, the practices and the pedagogical methodologies of these approaches (Lima, 2007).

Adult education cannot shy away from the problems affecting the economy, society, work and employment, but neither can it withstand the amputation of its social, ethical and political responsibilities as well as of its possible contributions towards the creation of dynamics leading to the positive transformation of the conditions of human existence. I take it for granted that adult education corresponds to a wide ranging politico-cultural project, capable of comprising modalities of formal, non-formal and informal education, basic education and higher education, political and cultural education for democratic citizenship, as well as adult and continuing education and vocational training.

However, this unity within diversity only seems possible to me, in the cases of training primarily geared towards work and employment, professional requalification or recycling, technical competences or workplace performance, when there is a broader educational and cultural project to give it sense.

I thus acknowledge that adult education comprises a political and normative dimension that possesses both democratic and emancipatory potential. In that case, however, it goes way beyond vocational training and skilling for employability and economic competitiveness, being, nevertheless, able to encompass them provided that they do not reject their educational nature nor discard their social and ethico-political responsibilities.

Given the diversity and the multiform nature of adult education I do acknowledge

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that it would be irresponsible for it to turn its back on the problems afflicting the economy, society, work and employment.

Nevertheless I deem it to be equally unacceptable that it should be in a subordinate position, i.e., on its knees buckled by the power of economic competitiveness, and to functional adjustments being transformed into restricted qualification programmes for human resources management and human capital strategies. As Ian Culpitt (1992: IX) observed more than twenty years ago, “Western governments are no longer ethically driven by the social needs of their citizenry but by the economic imperatives of survival”.

In fact we have been witnessing to a kind of educational *economism*: the decisive influence of economic science and of global capitalism on the public policies of education. Stephen Ball (1999: 126), observed “the increasing colonization of educational policy through imperatives of the economy”, and Peter McLaren (1999: 90) concluded: “Slowly but surely, education has been reduced to a subsector of the economy […].” Economy, and not pedagogy, constitutes, from now on, the principal basis of the legitimation process of education policies, the reason through which the values of the competitive market and of the private as public policy started to reign.

In the case of the European Union, for example, the construction of the “Europe of Citizens” is frequently presented as an acquisition that is very dependent on education and, especially, on lifelong learning. Individual responsibility is reinforced and also the increasing importance of the “economic motivations” or the pressures towards competition. But in the end, as Theodor Adorno (2000) observed, competition is a principle against a humanistic education.

Even when the European Union highlights the importance of education of its citizens towards social cohesion and recognizes the necessity of reinforcing its financing, it generally adopts an economic and competitive viewpoint: “to visibly increase the levels of investment in human resources, in order to give priority to the most important trump of Europe — its citizens”, according to words in the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*(Committee of the European Communities, 2000:4).

Indeed, education is being transformed into a chapter of human resources management, preferably oriented towards the production of “competitive advantages” in the global market, functionally adapted to economic rationality. This new canon dispatches education towards a merely adaptive function and citizenship towards a market model of liberties, strictly economic ones, of consumers.

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In this context, the humanistic-critical tradition and the emancipatory and transformative approach that characterizes adult popular education, in some cases since the end of the XIXth century, find themselves strongly impeded. Subordinated to the global imperative of modernization and of productivity, of adaptation, and of employability, adult popular education has been under siege. Either it is an object of a reconfiguration of a functional and vocational type, evolving towards training of a professional and continuous type, articulated with the economy and with companies (and, in this case, it prospers), or it insists on its tradition of social change and of "conscientization", articulating with popular social movements and renewing ideals of political education and of critical literacy (and, in this case, running serious risks).

In the scenario of pure adjustment and functional adaptation, the sectors of adult education will go through new symbolic and material means of reinforcement and legitimacy, although adult, popular, community education will be an object of a complex process of transmutation, which can culminate in the extinction of the concept itself, eventually maintaining some methods of work and of social mobilization and also some participatory techniques. This is the most congruent scenario with the present-day loss of protagonism of the social-democratic root of the concept of lifelong education in the tradition of authors, like Robert Hutchins (1970), Paul Lengrand (1970) or Edgar Faure (1972), and the erosion of the concept of adult education that occurred, throughout the last years, in the dominant discourses on education policies. Vocational training and, especially, individual learning, directed towards the future employee that looks for new competencies in order to reach "employability", already represent the dominant perspective. Social improvement, democracy and citizenship, solidarity and social justice give way to individual performance and competitiveness.

Learning humanity, solidarity and common good have perished with the status of modernist antiques in the light of a Pedagogy Against the Other. "Formativity", critically defined by Basil Bernstein (2001:14) as the individual ability the actor should have, only reveals its effectiveness when used against the other, with less "competences to compete". But, contrarily to what is stated by the dominant vocational ideologies, a system that would be able to fully satisfy the economy's demands and needs, producing the profiles and competences which are presented as imperatives, would be condemned to collapse. The competitive advantages and individual improvement would, then, be shared by everyone, or by the majority of individuals, being no longer advantageous and competitive. They would irremediably be replaced with new requirements, more selective and statistically

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less distributed within the respective population.

In practice, however, this ideology can impute responsibility for unemployment to education and its inefficiency in the production of skills it considers as relevant. It does so by hiding the economic and managerial rationale which justifies unemployment as a solution and conceives the downsizing phenomena as economic rationalization and entrepreneurial modernization strategies. The concept of employability, a symbol of the "conservative exaltation of individual responsibility" that changes each individual agent into an "*entrepreneur de lui-même*", as Pierre Bourdieu (2001:28) denounced, represents, now, one of the largest political and pedagogical mystifications that influences education and schools, that shapes curriculum, pedagogical practice and assessment. As István Mészáros (2003:121) has explained, the fight against massive structural unemployment, under the labor concept of "a quantifiable cost of production", is absolutely inconsequent.

However, in "liquid modernity", according to Zygmunt Bauman (2001:141), "the art of administration […] consists of keeping the 'human labour force' away or, even better, making it withdraw". The short time, the immediate and instantaneous became dominant, adopting the logic of consumption and choice without thinking in the long run. It is this apology of "nothing in the long run" that, according to Richard Sennett (2001:37), "corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment", consequently engendering the need for a learning process geared to flexibility and, perhaps, even for the "corrosion of character", through potentially corrosive pedagogical practices, but not educational any more.

Under these conditions, adult education faces, at the present time, challenges of great magnitude, especially when it doesn't renounce its contributions towards a critical education of citizens, towards political and economic democratization, towards transformation of the power of decision-making and towards social change. As we shall see next, the liberal and elitist theories of democracy, and also the principles of economic competitiveness of the market, reveal their opposition to the majority of the ideals of a democratic adult education, rather favoring individual learning processes, apparently neutral and depoliticized. Indeed, it seems that Boshier (1998:5) can have good reasons to conclude in a rather sour way: "If lifelong education was an instrument for democracy, lifelong learning is almost entirely preoccupied with the cash register."

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The relationships between education, democracy and citizenship have been, for a long time, the object of attention in the field of theories of democracy.

Carlos Torres (2001:183) calls attention to what he designates as “a central conceptual problem, a dilemma of democracy”. Torres (*Ibid.*) resumes a classical problem in democratic theory: the constitution of the democratic subject. He believes, according to the theories of participatory democracy, that democracy demands “the construction of a pedagogical subject”, since individuals are not born as participatory subjects, having, therefore, to learn how to participate in the *polis*. The virtue of the *activae civitatis* is a social and historical construction that, as such, demands education for its exercise. In this sense, democracy and participation would be as indispensable towards the establishment of a democratic education as a democratic education would be indispensable towards the realization of democracy and of participation. This implies a clearly educational and pedagogical dimension considered as immanent in every democratic practice, based on participation. Democratic participation represents, therefore, not only the establishment of a right, or only a process to reach democratic deliberations, but also encloses an intrinsic and substantive value, of nuclear pedagogical significance.

It is by the practice of democratic participation that democracy is constructed. It is making decisions through participatory practice that one learns how to participate and to acquire the indispensable knowledge, the necessary confidence in political expression, the *civic courage* that impels us to run the risks inherent to active participation. This is the essence of participatory democracy and of education towards participatory democracy, already well registered in the texts of various theorists, at least since J.J. Rousseau.

In her influential work entitled *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Carole Pateman (1970: 24-25) concludes that participation, for Rousseau, implies participating in the process of decision-making, a process through which it assumes an educating feature in its wider sense; through participation, the participant learns how to be both a public citizen or a private one.

In a similar way, John Stuart Mill confers great relevance to education for and by democracy, even when, contrary to Rousseau, he rejects direct democracy and defends representative democracy as the most perfect form of government. In his essay entitled *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill considers that the people, educated through effective exercise of participation, would end up

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identifying general interest with their own interests. Assuming that virtue and intelligence of human beings, belonging to a community, are the main element for good government, Mill defends the promotion of intelligence and virtue, that is, the education of the people, as the principal degree of excellence that a good government can have (Mill, 1998:226). According to him, “any education which aims at making human beings other than machines, in the long run makes them claim to have the control of their own actions” (*Ibid.*: 243). This will bring about, as the author defends, that democratic participation will not be limited at the national level of government, but will equally occur at the local level and even in the place of work, where each participant can learn how to self-govern him/herself.

Even in the case of certain supporters of liberal democracy, it is possible to find references to the educational worth of participation, as it is also the case of Alexis de Tocqueville (n.d.:90), that, in his *De la Democratie en Amérique*, acknowledges: “The most efficient process, and, maybe, the only one left, to interest men in the destiny of their country, is to lead them towards participating in the government.”

However, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001:48-49) calls attention to, liberal political theory is, today, used as a justification for a weak State. According to the author, this theory, “[…] particularly in its origin, defended the necessary convergence between political freedom and economic freedom, between free elections and free markets as two sides of the same coin: common good reached through the actions of utilitarian individuals involved in competitive exchanges with minimum state interference.” In truth, the demo-liberal canon is based on the precept that, without competition, there is no freedom, assuming that the diligent pursuit of private interest of each person will result in the obtaining of the general interest. It, therefore, assumes a weak or technocratic version of participation in contrast to the theory of participatory democracy (the strong version). Niklas Luhmann (1985:89) talks about the “false emancipation”, the emancipation as the “last management trick: to deny the distinction between superiors and subordinated, thereby taking away, from the subordinated, the power base.” The Brazilian sociologist, Maurício Tragtenberg (1989:15-16) referred ironically to “Alice in Wonderland”, that is, to participation reduced to the distribution of small or symbolic profit and to the sharing of some information, thereby permitting an improved functioning of the system. In those circumstances Tragtenberg concludes: “Participate, since things will continue the same.”

But, it is the so-called elitist theories of democracy that more openly refuse democratic participation in the decision process, education for and by participation

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and a concept of active and critical citizenship. I sustain that knowledge of their principal theses is indispensable for the analysis of contemporary educational policies.

Disbelieving the goodness, and even the possibility, of a democracy understood as the power of the people to govern themselves, the elitist perspectives, on the contrary, assume a concept of democracy as the power of the elite; the elite that are only chosen by the people to, in their name, govern them. It is, therefore, a "governed democracy" and not a "governing democracy", in accordance with the distinction proposed by Georges Burdeau (1975:33-39). It is a democracy reduced to a kind of competition of the elite for the people's votes. To this end, Joseph A. Schumpeter, in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, is quite clear in opposing the idea of political participation by citizens and, limiting democracy to a method of selecting leaders, proposes a kind of political competition, in great measure derived from an economic view that transforms voters into political consumers. Rejecting the ideals of *common good* and *popular will*, Schumpeter counters them with the *law of the mediocrity of the masses*. Democracy is transformed, in this way, into a "theory of competitive leadership", into a "democratic method" that the author defines as "that institutional agreement to reach political decisions in which individuals acquire the power of decision-making through a competitive struggle for the population's vote" (Schumpeter, 1984:336). It is, therefore, an instrumental perspective of democracy, a formal view that reduces it to a selection method and, as Norberto Bobbio (1988:13) says, to "a group of procedural rules in what the formation of collective decisions is concerned", alienating the substantive dimensions, disdaining the purposes and objectives, already subordinated to means. In short, democracy, according to Schumpeter (*Ibid.*:355), "only means that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the persons designated to govern them."

Highlighting especially the oligarchic sides of democracy, Robert Michels had already, at the beginning of the XXth century, insisted on the idea of a passive or "dependent" participation, as Alain Touraine would be calling it (1970:13). In his *Sociology of Political Parties*, and also starting from the thesis of the "intellectual superiority of the professional leaders" (derived from their education and technical competence) over the correspondent "formal and real incompetence of the masses", Michels (1982:35) concludes that "In spite of complaining sometimes, the majority is deep down delighted in having found individuals ready to take care of their matters." The power of the leaders is, therefore, not only guaranteed, but also

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legitimized in moral terms (*Ibid.*:56), reinforcing the aristocratic character that the author attributes to democracy and also its technical-rational character, since, according to Michels, the conflicts between efficiency and democracy will invariably be resolved with advantage towards efficiency, at democracy's cost. A democracy, in any case, considered, by him, to be "completely incompatible with strategic readiness", since "its strength is not fit for rapid action" (*Ibid.*:28).

The elitist approaches, in articulation with various other principles of economic liberalism that gave substance to the theory of liberal democracy, are shown, however, to be extremely influent today and, even though painfully, they can't help forcing us to conclude how, in their own way, they outline a diagnosis of contemporary democratic practices that are impossible to ignore.

Democratic invention continues to take place nowadays through struggles, protests and rebellion that, according to Claude Lefort (1981:42), "re-teach us that democracy is not, in its essence, bourgeois." Nevertheless, the problem is that, at the historical moment in which, on the one hand democratic struggles for the expansion of citizenship and of new rights occur with great intensity, on the other hand social regressions and attacks on the exercising of citizenship occur simultaneously. It is for this reason that the warning given by Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994:105) is very opportune when they state: "Today, when rhetoric about the 'triumph of democracy' accompanies economic devastation, it is time to insist there can be no democratic citizenship without social rights." We tend to forget this not understanding that the European crisis and the situation in the peripheral member-states is not just economic, not simply a fiscal dysfunction, by no means a problem that will be solved through public administration reforms, or by increasing the productivity of the labor-force. Even considering the tremendous austerity imposed on citizens with much appreciated results from international markets and organizations, real people keep on suffering and cannot feel anything changing for better. In the end it is democracy and social rights which are under attack and not the economy, the bank system or the markets. It is the promise of a democratic Union and of a European citizenship which is being discarded. In this specific context adult education cannot be just functional and well behaved without running the risks of becoming superfluous, dispensable or just a didactic instrument under a human resources strategy.

Maybe we want to keep on avoiding connections between adult education and politics and choose a position of neutrality, not understanding how ideological – in the sense of false conscience -, it is to try and deny the *politicity* of education, as

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Freire used to say. On the contrary, I believe that adult education must regain its democratic potential for transformation even if it will once again be labeled by some as “dangerous”, which for many of us would simply mean powerful, critical, active, hopeful and human.

It will not be easy to advocate for adult education for democracy and social transformation giving up some of the main economic and managerial arguments that have been used till now. But it will be absolutely necessary that democratic institutions and political actors understand the essence of adult education in all its dimensions: the humanization of human beings and their democratic participation in the process of re-creating the social world.

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